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If you aren't a big basketball fan, you may not know that we are in the middle of the NCAA basketball tournament. As a graduate of Duke Divinity School and MSU, and having grown up in CT, I have had some great teams to cheer for during the tournament. Now, unless you are a real fan of Duke basketball, you probably don't know that one of the greatest comeback stories in Duke Basketball history took place on January 27, 2001. The game was at College Park MD and with less than a minute to go, Duke was down by 10 points. Most people thought the game was over and the MD crowd was chanting "overrated" as they were ahead on number two Duke.

With 53.5 seconds left in the game, Jay Williams hit a lay-up to cut the lead to 8. Duke then trapped a MD player on the inbounds pass, stole the ball, and Jay Williams hit a 3 point shot so the lead was down to 5. After two missed free throws by MD, Duke had the ball and Jay Williams hit another 3 point shot so the lead was cut to 2. In 23.5 seconds, Jay Williams of Duke had scored 8 unanswered points.

On MD's inbound pass, Duke stole the ball again and while the shot didn't go in, a Duke player was fouled and hit two free throws so that the game was now tied. MD had a chance to win the game, but missed their shot, so the game went into overtime where Duke won. An article I read this week about the game said, *Duke's 2001 rally in College Park might be the most famous minute in Duke basketball history, a where-did-that-come-from blitz of skill and desperation that redeemed a game most saw as lost.*

I love that last line, **a comeback that redeemed a game most saw as lost**. As great as that comeback was, a true miracle minute, it was not the greatest comeback, the greatest comeback took place over 2000 years ago when one man who everyone thought was dead, and whose movement both Rome and the religious leaders of Israel thought was defeated, walked out of a tomb. Easter is the greatest comeback of all time, and it started like all comeback stories start, with a sense of failure and defeat.

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On Friday, Jesus had been crucified. One of his disciples had betrayed Him and the rest had abandoned Him. He died alone on a cross, and when He was taken down, His body was laid in a borrowed tomb. It was only a group of women who had walked with Jesus during His ministry, who saw where He was laid.

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.
Luke 23:55-56

One of the women who was part of this group was Mary Magdalene. While her name is familiar, we don't know much about her. What we do know of her comes from the gospel of Luke.

Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. **Luke 8:1-3**

Mary called Magdalene. Most women were identified by a man in their lives: like Joanna, the wife of Chuza. Since Mary was not known as Mary, wife of, or daughter of, or mother of, she was most likely alone. She may have been orphaned so was without a father or family to care for her. If she had no husband, she could have been divorced, which would have cut her off from both her family and her husband's family. She was also not a mother which carried its own sense of shame. Any one of these situations would have been devastating for Mary and put her on the outside of society.

The other thing we know about Mary is that she suffered from some kind of affliction, or demon possessions. We don't know what her demons were. They could have been physical problems, emotional

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disturbances, or true demonic possessions. No matter what the affliction was, her problems probably contributed to her being alone. Maybe she had been driven out of her home because of her brokenness and now, no man wanted anything to do with her. While we don't know what was going on before she met Jesus, we do know that Jesus radically changed her life. She was a new woman who now had a sense of meaning and purpose. She had a future and she owed it all to Jesus, which is why she had joined His movement and walked with Him.

While women would not have been able to be called disciples in Jesus' day, Mary was very much a disciple of Jesus. She walked with Him. She listened to His teaching. She saw His miracles, and it says that she gave her money and resources to help support the work Jesus was doing. Unlike the male disciples, Mary was at the cross when Jesus died, and she saw the place where He was laid. Now, early in the morning, she was making her way to the tomb.

The resurrection accounts in the four gospels are all a little different. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us that a group of women went to the tomb at sunrise, but John's gospel says that Mary went alone while it was still dark. What helps us understand this difference is knowing that John is not interested in giving us exact details about the resurrection, his writing is full of symbols that are to help us understand what's going on.

John says Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark, and darkness was a common symbol for John. In John's gospel, darkness was a sign of evil, confusion, and fear. John's gospel tells us that when Judas left the upper room to go and betray Jesus it then became night. Evil was coming for Jesus.

John is the one who told the story of Nicodemus coming to ask Jesus what it meant to be born again. John said Nicodemus came at night and the reason he came at night was because he was afraid. Nicodemus wasn't afraid of Jesus; he was afraid of being seen

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coming to Jesus. The darkness was a sign of Nicodemus' confused, uncertain and doubt.

Darkness was a place of confusion and brokenness. It was a place of hopelessness and despair, and that was how Mary felt as she made her way to the tomb. Mary was coming to the tomb *while it was still dark* because she felt hopeless. The one and maybe only man who had ever loved her, accepted her, and helped her find meaning and purpose in life was gone. He had died a horrible and painful death and Mary had no idea what her future would be. Would the demons return? Would anyone else respect her and see value in her life? Could she survive without Jesus? All seemed lost.

John also has Mary coming to the tomb alone and he might do that so we can more easily see ourselves in Mary. Without anyone else there, we can put ourselves in Mary's place. Have you ever felt hopeless? Have you ever looked at your future and thought that all was lost? Many of us have been in situations like this. We get a hopeless diagnosis, and the doctors tell us there isn't anything they can do. We are watching the destruction of a relationship or find ourselves going through a financial crisis and we see no way out. John places Mary at the tomb alone and in the dark because he wants us to our place in the resurrection story.

Mary is each one of us and as often happens in life, just when we think that things can't get any worse, they do, and they do for Mary. When Mary arrived at the tomb, she saw that the stone had been rolled away. This didn't fill Mary with joy. There was no possibility that this was the work of Jesus, the only thought Mary had was that someone had taken Jesus' body. That was the message Mary took to the disciples and when they arrived at the tomb, they found it just as she said - empty. While the disciples returned home, Mary stayed and stood weeping outside the tomb.

Mary was overwhelmed. She watched the man who loved her and had saved her crucified and buried. She had no idea where the body

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was, she just assumed that someone had stolen it to humiliate Jesus even more. They stole the body to create maximum chaos, confusion and pain and Mary couldn't take any more. She is tired and empty and alone. She weeps.

This picture of Mary weeping outside the tomb is a picture many of us can identify with. There are times we all feel tired, empty, and alone. There are times we can't see any way out of the situation we are in and no matter what happens we know things will just get worse. As much as Mary loved Jesus, believed in Jesus and walked with Him these past few years, she simply could not see what Jesus was about to do. And this is often true for us. We can believe in Jesus, love Jesus and strive to walk with Him but when we find ourselves in dark and difficult places in our own lives, it's hard to see what God can do

And this is where the comeback starts. Mary is down 10 points, there is less than a minute left in the game, the crowd is chanting overrated and Mary has no idea how things could get better, but then she sees a man outside the tomb. Mary is so hopeless that she can't fully see who she is talking to until He speaks one familiar word - **Mary**.

At the sound of her name, Mary recognizes the voice of Jesus and realizes that He is not dead but alive. She doesn't know how He can be alive, and did you notice that she didn't ask. She doesn't care. She simply grabs Him, holds on to Him, and is not about to let Him go. Jesus literally had to say, *Mary, let go. I have more to do and there is more for you to do. Go tell my disciples that I'm alive.*

The Easter story was not just a comeback of the ages for Jesus, it was a comeback for Mary. Jesus' resurrection was the *where did that come from* blitz of love and power that redeemed people who thought all was lost. The resurrection of Jesus can be our comeback story as well if we will remember just two important things:

#1. **The worst thing is NEVER the last thing.**

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Author and theologian Fredrick Buechner said, *The worst thing isn't the last thing... It's the next to last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well.*

The worst thing we'll ever go through, no matter what it might be, is never the last thing because of the comeback of Jesus. Even death does not have the final say because death itself has been swallowed up in the victory of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul said,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:35, 37-39

No matter what you are going through today, no matter what battle you are fighting, what game you are losing, or how desperate and hopeless the situation looks and feels, this is not the end. Jesus is the end and the resurrection of Jesus reminds us that God's redeeming grace and power and love will always win.

This doesn't mean everything will work out the way we want it to and that we won't struggle at times and be disappointed. Those things will happen, but the resurrection tells us that God can and will work for good in every situation. If God can bring a resurrection out of a crucifixion, God can redeem any and all situations and restore our lives.

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#2. **Jesus knows OUR name.**

The resurrection of Jesus can be our comeback if we will remember that Jesus knows our name. What turned things around for Mary was hearing Jesus call her by name. I wonder if it was Jesus calling Mary by name that drove out the demons in the first place? Was the power of Jesus calling her name a second time what opened her eyes and heart outside the tomb?

There is power when Jesus calls out our name and Jesus knows your name. Jesus knows your situation. He knows when you feel like there is less than a minute to go in the game and the game is already lost. That is the very moment He says, *“Andy” you're not done yet. The game is not over, in fact, the best is yet to come.*

If you are having trouble hearing Jesus call out your name, do what Mary did. She stayed in the garden. Peter, James, John and the rest of the disciples left the empty tomb when they didn't see Jesus, but Mary stayed and because she stayed, she was the one who got to hear and see Jesus.

Sometimes it's hard to stay in the faith when things aren't going well. When the world tells us the death and resurrection of a man 2000 years doesn't mean anything for us, it's hard to stay. It's hard to hold on to our faith. But if we will stay, if we persevere through the dark and difficult moments of doubt and fear, we will hear Jesus call our name and we will see Him. The comeback of the ages can be ours if we will stay and learn to walk with Jesus.

Walk with Jesus. It's what we have been talking about for the past 6 weeks. Five spiritual practices that help us remain faithful and experience the fullness of life with Jesus. The five spiritual practices are *worship, reading and reflecting on God's word, serving God and others, giving generously, and sharing our faith.* You might not be surprised to hear this, but these five spiritual practices are all part of Mary's comeback.

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What is the first thing Mary did when she recognized Jesus? She worshipped Him. She literally holds on to Jesus with all she has and this is a great picture of worship. Worship is holding on to Jesus with all we have.

Then she heard the word of God. Jesus said, ***Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*** **John 20:17**

Mary doesn't just hear the word, she acts on them and she is the very first person to share the news that Christ is Risen. She is literally the first person to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mary is walking with Jesus through worship, hearing and acting on the word of Jesus, and sharing her faith. The rest of her life was given to what she had been doing before as she walked with Jesus, serving, and giving generously. The greatest comeback of all time was when Jesus walked out of the tomb defeating sin and death, but His comeback is ours as well. Today, the worst thing we go through will never be the last thing because Jesus not only knows our name, but he is calling out to us today.

Next Steps

Mary at the Tomb - Easter 2024

Read **John 20:1-23**.

- Darkness in John's gospel is a symbol of evil, hopelessness, confusion, doubt, and fear.
- How is Mary experiencing all these things in her life as she makes her way to the tomb?
- When have you experienced this kind of hopelessness and fear?
- Why was the empty tomb not a sign of joy when Mary first arrived?
- Why do we often think the worst when we experience a problem?

What began to turn things around for Mary? **John 20:16**

- What did seeing Jesus alive mean for Mary?
- What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for you?

The worst thing is never the last thing.

Read **Romans 8:35-39**.

- What struggle are you experiencing today?
- How is God walking with you in this struggle?
- How might God be able to use it for good?
- Remind yourself that a resurrection is coming.

Jesus knows your name.

Read **Psalms 139, Isaiah 43:1-7, Isaiah 49:15-16, Matthew 6:25-27, and John 10:1-18**.

- When have you heard Jesus call out your name?
- To hear Jesus speak your name, stay with Him.
- Use these 5 spiritual disciplines to walk with Jesus:
 - Worship.
 - Read the scriptures.
 - Serve God and others.
 - Give generously.
 - Share God's love with others.