

LESSONS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

HOLY SPIRIT: GOD COMES

JOHN 20:11-18

Over the last few weeks I've been looking in the rearview mirror of my life at some of the important lessons I've learned in my walk with God. For the last two weeks we've looked at the importance of **God's grace**. Beginning this morning we'll focus on the **Holy Spirit**. *The Holy Spirit is God, and through the Holy Spirit - God Comes... God Acts... God Speaks... God Transforms...* That's our outline for the next four weeks... And I'm praying that we all will be moved anew by the Holy Spirit!

Let's start in John 20, verse 11, "But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down *and looked* into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."

Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and *that* He had spoken these things to her."

Mary Magdalene had followed Jesus *along the shores of the lake... over green Galilean hills... through mountain passes... in and out of villages... down dusty city streets...* A few days ago she followed Him up a hill called Calvary – *where she saw Jesus undergo unspeakable horrors*. And now she's followed Him again... She's tracked His crucified corpse to a tomb, not far from the site of His execution. She's carrying with her oils and spices. Her goal is to dress the body for burial. This is the last time she'll follow Jesus - *or so she thinks...*

I'm sure Mary began following Jesus the day He saved her life. Somewhere along her journey – maybe as a young girl – her life started spiraling downward. Insecurity led to flirtation - which led to promiscuity - which led to heartache - which led to abuse - which led to deep despair. At some point, Mary gave up on the good-life. To escape her pain she tried to self-destruct. She gave herself over to darkness and deception. When Mark's Gospel mentions Mary, he identifies her with eight words that sum up her whole life, "*out of whom He had cast seven demons.*" Imagine, a life so void of *hope* that it had become a *home* to seven devils. But when Jesus touched Mary's *troubled life and tormented heart*, He drove that pack of demons away with such force they were afraid to return. Jesus gave Mary a new lease on life - *and Mary followed Jesus!* As the disciples moved from place to place it always comforted her to see Jesus out in front... She would inch up close while He taught, so she wouldn't miss a word... Whenever Jesus encountered the masses she'd find a good vantage point where she could be amazed by His miracles... In the years that she followed Jesus she never knew where she would be the next day, but she always had the sense she was going places!

But as she followed Jesus to the tomb this was different. Mary was grieved. When she looked out in front, Jesus was no longer leading the pack. She'd never again hear Him teach, or see Him heal... Rather than going places - she felt lost, and confused, and empty.

That's where we find Mary in verse 11. She's outside the rock tomb with tears streaming down her face. She's suffered a terrible loss. She weeps. Peter and John have already investigated. Someone has taken Jesus' body. Mary returned to the scene of the crime. She's so shocked by it all. For some reason

she looks inside again... and this time the tomb is no longer vacant - there're two angels. They ask her why she's weeping. In the midst of their conversation she hears footsteps. It's a man. She thinks it's the gardener. She asks Him if he's the one who's moved the body?

And when He speaks her name it all clicks. He says, "**Mary!**" And it was the way He said it... *No one spoke Mary's name the way Jesus did...* When her **parents** called her name, it was to scold... The **men in her life** spoke her name, but then treated her like trash... Her **neighbors** said "**Mary**" only when they wanted to judge... But when Jesus spoke her name the tone in His voice conveyed hope and acceptance. When Jesus said "**Mary**" - she knew she was loved.

And notice how Mary responds to Jesus... There were varying degrees of respect a Jewish girl could show her teacher. At the lowest level you used the abbreviation, "rab..." To add respect you used the term, "rabbi..." But the highest honor was Mary's reply... "**Rabboni.**" Suddenly, it dawns on Mary her days of following Jesus are *not* over! He'll still be her teacher. He's still her north star. She figures Jesus will always be in her field of vision. She'll never be out of earshot. She'll *see Him*, and *hear Him*, and *hold Him* - and *follow Him* just as she had before.

Mary is so relieved... she falls at His feet and clings to Jesus with all her might. She had seen Him crucified... *now she'll never let go of Him again.* I'm surprised she didn't knock Him over she grabs Him so tightly. Mary is determined to lock arms and hold on to Jesus forever. But that's when Jesus speaks cryptic words! You don't expect a rebuke at this point – even a gentle one. You figure He'll encourage her grip. Yet Jesus says, "**Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father.**" For years I misread this verse. I assumed Jesus was waving Mary off for some reason. Was there something peculiar about a resurrected body? Is holiness harmful? Could the risen Lord somehow be radioactive? I figured a risen body was too holy to be touched by human hands.

But I've since come to realize that's not what Jesus is saying at all. In the next few verses, He invites Thomas to touch His hands and His side. The issue wasn't *that* Mary touched Him – it was *how* she touched Him. Mary *clung* to Jesus. The word translated "**cling**" means "**to attach or fasten.**" Jesus was saying to Mary... "**Don't get attached to my physical presence. I won't be around in this bodily form much longer. The type of interaction we've had up until now isn't a permanent arrangement.**" Jesus is about to ascend to His Father. That doesn't mean His relationship with Mary will end. *It will never end – but it will change.* And Mary will have to learn to relate to Jesus in another way - a *spiritual way*.

In John 16:7 Jesus made an astonishing statement. It boggles my brain.

He told His disciples, "**It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.**" *How could Jesus' departure ever be seen as an advantage?* Imagine, *bases loaded – Braves trail 3 to 2 – it's Brian McCann's turn to bat...* but instead of grabbing some timber and driving in the winning runs, our best hitter tells the team it's to their advantage that he leaves?

How can this be?... How could Jesus' exodus ever be seen as a plus? Here's the answer... Jesus' departure paved the way for the Holy Spirit to come. Jesus was one man, in one place, at one time – with just two hands and two legs. But the Spirit lives in every Christian, in every country, in every century. That means He has *hordes of hands* and *legions of legs*.

If Mary had succeeded in clinging to Jesus... if our Lord had remained *earthbound* - and *Mary-bound* – and *Jerusalem-bound* - then today His attention and aid would be limited. Jesus opted for a different relationship. He ascended to the Father, so that He could return in the Spirit. I love what Augustine prayed, "**Jesus, You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts.**"

God the *Holy Spirit* will come to Mary, and dwell where *evil spirits* once lived! She will continue to follow Jesus, but rather than rely on her eyes, and ears, and feet to keep up with Him – from now on, *she'll use her heart.* **Rather than tighten her grip, Mary will need to strengthen her faith!** When Mary clung to Jesus she wanted to hold on to what she had. She desired a tangible attachment to her Lord. But Jesus had a better idea... In fact, it's also His plan for us. This is why He tells Mary, "**But go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'**" The call of Christ is "**faith – not fasten.**"

In Christ, God came into this world... On earth Jesus came to troubled towns, and hopeless villages, and lost people... And today Jesus still comes. God comes to us. But He does so in the person of the Holy Spirit. God hasn't abandoned His creation... Jesus isn't just hanging out in heaven, aloof from our pain... He comes to us, but it's via the Holy Spirit!

Have you ever noticed the contrast in the way Christians talk about Jesus, and then talk about the Holy Spirit... *if they reference Him at all!* It's obvious we feel much more comfortable with Jesus, than we do the Holy Spirit. We speak of loving, and serving, and walking with Jesus... but have you ever said you loved the Holy Spirit, or wanted to walk with Him? We're boldly allied to Jesus, but we shy away from the Holy Spirit. Listen to Christian music - Jesus is the favorite topic. Few songs are sung about the Holy Spirit... And you'll hear fewer sermons. Pastors are quick to find inspiration in the miracles and parables of Jesus, but the Holy Spirit's work in the book of Acts remains a mystery to most Christians.

People are quick to relate to Jesus. He was *one of us*. He lived *among us*. He took on flesh, and blood, and bone. He's as human as you and me. Jesus bled, and wept, and got weary. His stomach even growled. He walked our streets and ate our food. He attended weddings and funerals. He dealt with sick people, and paid taxes, and walked from place to place, and went fishing. *He was better at it than I am, but He still fished!* In so many ways I can relate to Jesus. It's easy to picture Him in my mind and imagine how His voice might've sounded. I gravitate to Jesus. *But the Holy Spirit is more of a quandary!* He's more difficult for me to figure out. It's easier for me to relate to *flesh and bone*, than it is to *spirit*... And when I look in the rearview mirror of my life the churches I grew up in sure didn't help my dilemma. We were scared to death of the Holy Spirit.

In those days, southern churches read the OKJ version which meant we didn't even use the term, "Holy Spirit." We called God the "Holy Ghost." I could relate to "God the Father." I had a dad – a good one. I related to "God the Son." I was somebody's son... But "God the Ghost" – *give me a break!* I associated ghosts with haunted houses, not the house of God. I hear "Holy Ghost" and think, "*Who you going to call? Ghost Busters!*" *Where's Akroyd and Murray?*

Imagine a 12 year old boy being told he needs the "Holy Ghost." It was downright scary. Asking to be filled with the Holy Ghost seemed eerily similar with being possessed. Would God sneak up on me and shout "*boo!*" As a kid the closest I came to relating to *the Holy Ghost* was "Casper." There was a cartoon character, "*Casper the friendly ghost.*" Sadly, that's who I thought of when I heard the preacher comment on the "Holy Ghost." **God as Father I could grasp... Jesus was real to me... But the Holy Spirit was a tough idea to wrap my mind around.** And many Christians share my dilemma - it's tough for earthbound mortals to cozy up to spirit.

Like Mary, we're a *tactile* breed. We like stuff we can hold and touch. This is why some folks carry cash. They like the *feel* of real money in their pocket. I still prefer a paycheck over direct deposit. I want to hold my earnings in my hand. All of us gravitate toward the tangible and visible.

When theologians discuss human beings they use the term "*dichotomy.*" You and I are two parts – *we're physical* and *we're spiritual*. There's a part of you that's *temporal* – your body will die. But there's another part of you that will live forever – your spirit or soul is *eternal*. Every human being is one part *flesh*, and another part *spirit*.

But when man sinned this dual-capacity became loaded to one side. Think of it this way... Most folks are either *right-hand dominant* or *left-hand dominant*. Every now and then you run across a person who goes left or right equally well. We call them *ambidextrous*... That's how God made Adam and Eve. They were the perfect balance of *spiritual* and *physical*. Adam and Eve had a *sixth sense* - *they walked with God in the cool of the day*. Their spiritual sensitivity was as acute as their other five senses. They could taste, smell, see, feel, hear – *and know God*.

Before sin entered the world man was a two-stroke engine firing on both cylinders. But when Adam ate the forbidden fruit his spiritual cylinder blew a rod. He tilted. Rather than ambidextrous, he became flesh-dominant. Fallen man has become *spirit-stunted* and *physically-oriented*. This is why we gravitate toward sight, and touch, and sound, and flavor, and aroma. All the while we're dull spiritually. Even after we become Christians our tendency is still toward the palpable. We fight with the flesh. We're weighted toward the world. The tangible is what grabs our attention.

And this is true even when it comes to religion. The true God isn't constrained by time or space. He's never limited to what can be seen, or felt, or heard. God is too big for our five senses. Yet throughout history, human beings have gravitated toward gods that are physical and visible. *Spirit is not enough.* We like to pack our gods with stuffing. They're called idols. These are gods with knobs. Humans can handle and fasten on to an idol. People like meaty, fleshy, grab-able gods. Of all the ancients only the Hebrews worshipped the invisible God.

And they did it ever so imperfectly... The Hebrews in the desert - the golden calf of Jeroboam - the Baal of Phoenicia... over and over misled worshippers rejected the God who is spirit, for a god they could touch. All of history teaches us that human beings are chronic idolaters. Still today, empty people try to fill spiritual needs with what's seeable and feel-able. They worship luxury, and authority, and celebrity.

Even people who want to follow God, look for Him in the wrong places. They insist on a concrete spirituality with no loose ends. They want a God Who's all figured out. A religion with no uncertainty or ambiguity... where trust is never necessary. You know exactly where you stand. People want religion that yields results. You plug in a prayer and get back an answer. It doesn't matter if it's true, or God's will, they just want solutions they can deposit – checks they can cash – *not more promises...* The thing we fear most is that God might just ask us to have faith.

In fact, isn't this what Mary wanted? A god she could see and hold and pocket. She threw her arms around Jesus, determined to never let Him go. Mary wants to keep Jesus close, and contained, and within arms' reach. As long as He was in her grasp, she had Him. Jesus was hers. But *the goal of true religion is not for us to own God – it's for God to own us!* In Jesus, God became a man - but God is still the invisible, ethereal, eternal Spirit. This is why Mary's grip wasn't tight enough to hold Jesus. He wouldn't stay. It was necessary for Him to ascend to His Father.

The Eternal Son took on flesh and blood to bridge the gap between God and man. Jesus wanted to be a God to whom His creation could relate. But as soon as God took a body, people wanted to nail Him down. Mary wasn't the only person who tried to limit Jesus, and hold Him back, and keep Him down. This was the goal of the Jewish leaders, and Romans politicians, and all the hard hearts since who fear His authority. Little people questioned Jesus' claims, and doubted His deity. They were determined to nail Him down – *even if the nails they used were real.*

And this is why Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He wanted to prove that no one can nail Him down. *Not then... not now...* This is what Jesus is teaching Mary. He doesn't fit between your fingers. Jesus is more than a handful. He's bigger than that - He's bigger than even life itself! **No hand can restrain Him. No box will contain Him.** Jesus took a human body – *and He's still a man* – but today He fills the heavens. The Lord Jesus can never be limited, or reduced, or corralled. Jesus willingly nailed Himself to our plight; but then He rose again and ascended to His Father. Today, His Spirit moves about free and unfettered. And from now on Mary will have to relate to Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

As I look back in the rearview mirror of my life I see where I've been like Mary. I've clung to Jesus *mentally*, while He was on the move *spiritually*. How can you truly follow Jesus, if you neglect the Holy Spirit? Earlier I mentioned the confusion that occurred in my 12 year old mind whenever I'd hear the preacher talk about *the Holy Ghost*. Yet today, I've come to appreciate the terminology. I now think the King James translators were not that far off. The third person of the Trinity is a lot like *a holy ghost*.

In popular lore, ghosts are spiritual beings – the souls of the departed. Ghosts are depicted as airy, ethereal, intangible, mystical... They're spirits no longer bound by flesh and blood. You can't grab hold of a ghost. Snap his photo, but a ghost won't appear in the negative. They're impossible to detect with physical apparatus. Ghosts are paranormal and other-worldly... *And the Holy Spirit shares many of the same traits...*

In a sense the Holy Ghost is the spirit of a departed person. Jesus departed this earth and sent the Spirit in His stead. The NT refers to the Holy Ghost as *"the Spirit of Christ."* Certainly, the Holy Spirit is God in His own right, but He reflects the heart, and nature, and spirit of Jesus. This is why Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as *"another Comforter."* The word Jesus chose means *"another of the same type."* The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. He's Jesus, no longer bound by the forces of nature. Gravity and proximity no longer hold Him. He now moves as He pleases.

And the Spirit moves like the wind. Like a ghost, He's airy and breezy. In both OT Hebrew and NT Greek the word "*spirit*" means "air, or breath, or wind." In Hebrew, it's the word "*ruach*" - in Greek, it's "*pneuma*." *Pneumatic* tools are hammers and wrenches empowered by air. Think about the wind... It's amazing how something invisible can be so powerful. A hurricane can level a landscape. You feel it, but you can't see the wind. And so it is with God's Spirit - He's airy and intangible, but real!

And like a ghost, the wind has a mind of its own. You see this at Wrigley Field in downtown Chicago. One inning the wind is blowing in the batter's face. He tries to spit and wets himself. The next inning the wind is at his back. Balls fly out of the stadium on the Jetstream. Here's the point, the wind is unpredictable. It changes direction at will. And this is what Jesus says about the Holy Spirit. John 3:8, "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" God is like a ghost in that He rides on the wind. He too is unpredictable.

Over and over in Scripture the Holy Spirit is linked to wind or breath. When Jesus imparted His Spirit to His disciples, we're told in John 20:22, "*He breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit.*" On the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on the Church the disciples in the upper room heard the sound of "*a rushing mighty wind.*" The Holy Spirit is wind-like, ghostlike. He's intangible, but powerful.

In John 4 Jesus met a Samaritan woman by Jacob's well. Possessing all knowledge, He knew her sordid history. She'd been passed around by the men of Samaria like a water bottle on a football field. Five different husbands had chewed her up and spit her out. But Jesus cared about this woman. He promises her living water. He wants to slake her spiritual thirst. That's when she changes the subject.

She gets theological... In ancient times people worshipped God on mountain tops. The Samaritans had a mountain. The Jews worshipped on their mountain in Jerusalem. She asks Jesus which is the right mountain? If she'd asked the question 50 years earlier, "*Jerusalem,*" would've been correct. But now that Jesus is on the scene, He says neither group gets it. Jesus explains to this woman what Mary learned, "*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*" Mary assumed closeness to God was achieved logistically - through proximity - but Jesus corrected her... *The way to intimacy with God is through the Holy Spirit.*

God comes... He came to this woman... And He comes to us... but because God is Spirit, you and I have to relate to Him in a spiritual way. And this requires faith! To follow what is *seen* I would focus... To follow what is *heard* I would listen... To follow what is *taste-able* I would savor... To follow what is *rational* I would study... But the only way to follow *God's Spirit* is to believe! You can't grab a ghost... You follow the Holy Ghost by faith!

I'm a man grounded in every day life. My two feet are firmly planted on terra-firma. I've got a house, three cars, and a mortgage. I pay taxes, and buy groceries, and put shoes on my kid's feet. I'm a "*down to earth guy.*" Ordinarily, I would never waste time chasing a ghost. Tell me about the Carpenter from Nazareth. I can relate to a working man. Tell me that through bravery and sacrifice He died to save the world. I would be drawn to such a man. I'd open a Bible to learn about that Man. But try to convince me to follow a ghost, and I'd think you were crazy.

This is the problem with modern Christians. We've built concrete, materialistic, rational lives. And we've left no room for the mystical and the supernatural in our thinking. Part of the Christian life is believing the historical facts about Jesus and what He did... *but faith doesn't stop there!* For God comes to us like a ghost - *a Holy Ghost.* He comes spiritually, and we need faith to walk in a spiritual way - wide open to a Holy Spirit. I'm a "*down-to-earth*" guy, but I follow an "*out-of-this-world*" God.

I want to close with a story from the life of the Prophet Elijah.

The man of God challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown. Whoever sent fire from heaven - Baal or Yahweh - would be worshipped. The idol proved impotent, while Elijah's God burned up the sacrifice. On this day, God supplied the nation with a little shock and awe! But that's not the end of the story. Elijah iced a whole army of false prophets, but was scared of one woman. When he heard that the wicked, Queen Jezebel had put out a hit on him, he tucked tail and ran for the hills. He threw a pity party, and made himself the guest of honor.

At the earlier showdown, Elijah was in tune with God's Spirit. His faith kicked in. He was functioning on a spiritual frequency. He believed in what he couldn't see – He trusted an invisible God to come and work mightily. But now Elijah tilts back toward the physical world. His faith vanishes and his *senses* work overtime... His **ears** perk up to Jezebel's vile threats. He **eyes** no other prophet carrying God's banner, so he assumes he's all alone. His **stomach** growls. His **body** grows weary. He crawls into a cave. And here God teaches us how He *comes* to discouraged people...

God calls Elijah out of the cave, and we're told, "a great and strong wing tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces..." And I love how the biblical writer follows it up, "But the LORD was not in the wind." After the wind, an earthquake rocks the mountain. "But the LORD was not in the earthquake." Then a fire scorches the mountainside. Again, "the LORD was not in the fire..." But listen to his next words, "and after the fire a still small voice." God didn't come to Elijah in the storm, or quake, or fire. God came to him in a subtle way - almost ghostlike - He whispered.

And you have to be quiet, and spiritual, and listening to hear a whisper. I'm afraid churches today cultivate the wrong atmosphere. We have flashing lights, and sound systems, and smoke machines, and props, and technology... And there's nothing wrong with any of these things per se... But the biblical writer might pen, "The LORD was not in the slideshow." Rather than encourage folks to be spiritual, and be open to the whispers of the Holy Ghost, churches today try to *blow people away*, and *rock their world*, and *fire them up*. But God wasn't in the storm, or quake, or fire.

Christians today like fireworks and *spectacles*. What we need is to be more *spiritual*. Psalm 46:10 invites us, "Be still, and know that I am God." Over the next few weeks I hope to tilt us toward the spiritual side of life. We don't need *more to see* - or *more to touch*. We need the Holy Ghost. When the Father rained down fire on Elijah's sacrifice, *God came*... When the Son implanted Himself in the womb of a virgin, *God came*... But today, *God comes* to His people in a different way... God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and truth. God doesn't show up in the storm, or quake, or fire - the tangible and visible - He shows up spiritually. *God comes... to hearts that believe!*

In Luke 17 the Pharisees questioned Jesus. He'd been preaching, "The kingdom of God is at hand." But they saw none of the trappings you'd expect with a kingdom - *no palaces, no budgets, no armies, no thrones*. The Pharisees, *like all men are prone to do*, were tilting toward the material and visible. They were looking for an outward, political kingdom. But Jesus explains, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." God's kingdom is spiritual. The Holy Ghost moves behind the scenes. He speaks to hearts with His still small voice.

I'm praying we'll look past the tangible, concrete world to which we've become so accustom... *and realize there's more...* There's a Holy Ghost! He's real. He's God. He comes to us... *Let's be open... Let's be still... Let's have faith... And let's make our lives accessible to the Holy Spirit!*