

St George's Sermon by Karen Spoelstra, 9 May 2021

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene

Back-to-front-day with our boys

Since our boys were young, we would designate one day on our summer holiday in Golden Bay to be our 'back to front' day. On this day, the boys became the parents and Chris became the kids. They could choose what we did, where we went and even what we ate. Their only constraint was the budget we gave them. This led to many visits to their favourite places, - the local farm park, the labyrinth and the ferris wheel at the A& P show. At the farm park they could pet the lama's, and feed the eels and play mini golf. At the labyrinth, which was world famous in Golden bay for its pancake like limestone formations, they ran the narrow trails and hunted for the plastic dinosaurs between the rocks and under the ferns. As the year's progressed Zachary got clever at managing the budget to maximise the lolly spend while still making sure there was enough for dinner. As they got older, Chris and I upped the ante by expecting the boys to navigate their way to our destination while we acted like kids in the car calling out 'are we there yet' and 'I have to go to the toilet now'.

Samuel

The bible is full of 'back to front' stories, in our old testament reading we learnt that God choose not to speak through the religious hierarchy but through a 12 year old boy, Samuel. As we heard in the reading, 'in those days the word of the Lord was rare, there were not many visions' and when God choose to speak it was to a child. It took some time for the high priest Eli to realise God was calling Samuel and it took Samuel some time to recognise God's voice. Old and young, we need each other.

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene

Our gospel reading and the focus of this sermon is the beautiful and most well known of resurrection stories – Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene in the garden. To recap the story:

- Mary has risen before dawn to honour her Lord by anointing his body with burial spices.
- To her considerable distress his body is missing
- Grief stricken she searches for his body and comes across the gardener.
- The gardener calls her by name and she recognises that in fact, it is Jesus.
- She wants to hold onto him and he wants her to go, to tell the disciples that he has risen.

This is not just a story about a reunion between Jesus and Mary, it is about ultimate destinies: Jesus, Mary's, – and the disciples. Jesus tells her: *"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."* The gospel story has not concluded; it is still unfolding. She must relate that to the disciples. Jesus is announcing his new creation.

The resurrection appearances have two things in common

1. Jesus treats his followers as beloved,

He uses Mary's name, he breaks bread on the road to Emmaus and he speaks shalom, not blame in the Upper Room and he prepares breakfast for Peter on the beach and offers him redemption; and

2. Jesus sends them out with a mission

Scholars often tell us that the resurrection narratives are also commission stories, sending believers out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word.

Mary is sent to bring the good news to the other disciples (to be an apostle to the apostles), Peter is told "Feed my Sheep" and the disciples are told the Holy Spirit will empower them to make disciples of all the nations.

Mary's telling of the good news of the resurrection of Jesus encounters a hiccup however, the disciples don't believe her. They send Peter and the beloved disciple to check the tomb and it's only when they come back with the news that it is empty that they start to consider the possibility that Jesus is alive.

Why would the disciples doubt Mary? Jesus had chosen her after all. They had also known her since the early days of Jesus' ministry when he had cast 7 demons out of her. She had been a faithful follower of Jesus, standing at the foot of his cross, comforting his mother and determined that he be buried with honour.

For Mary Magdalene is a woman. Someone who was hemmed in by Jewish society,

- Not allowed into their places of worship beyond the outside courts,
- not allowed to own property,
- not allowed to bear witness in a court of law.

Her very gender diminished her in the disciples eyes.

What I find even sadder is how she has been portrayed in history. To this day most people believe she was the penitent prostitute who anointed Jesus' feet with her perfume and tears in Luke's gospel. Despite the fact that Luke doesn't even name the prostitute. It was only later that the medieval church associated the prostitute with Mary. A myth that has lasted to this day. Many scholars believe this was an attempt to diminish Mary Magdalene as a leader in the early church. They didn't want Christian women to get ideas above their station. It wasn't until 1969 that the Roman Catholic Church admitted that the text of the Bible does not support that interpretation.

We have made progress in the western world at least, on the equality of women, but do we have other blind spots? People groups that we do not pay attention to because they are different. Are we open to hearing the voice of God from someone who is younger than us, less experienced

than us, less accomplished than us, - would we take 12 year Samuel seriously if he was in our youth group?

I think most of us know that we have blind spots, but we're unsure of how to overcome them. I'm no expert, but sometimes I wonder if our **privilege** gets in the way of our hearing God's voice. Our church is in the middle of one of the most expensive suburbs in Auckland with some of the most desirable schools and commute to the CBD. Many of us were born into a life of privilege by virtue of the parents we were born to, the neighbourhood we grew up in, the schools we attended and the friendships we took into adulthood. Our parents made sure we did our homework, saved our pocket money and made us learn the violin. Undoubtedly, we have worked hard, but our privilege has given us a head start. We also often end up only mixing socially and spiritually with other people like us.

How often do we engage in a meaningful way with people who are younger than us, older than us, from a different ethnicity than us, who have a disability, who are unemployed? Has our privilege isolated us from these people and dimmed their voices.

How can we avoid being like Eli or the disciples?

For some, a crisis like - a redundancy or a debilitating illness or injury, has awakened them to a new perspective, a new way of living. Psychoanalysts call this a 'healing crisis'. For many it enables them to hear God in new ways as they acknowledge their vulnerability and relinquish control over their lives.

My own 'healing crisis' happened while Chris and I were living in Dunedin and I was 8 months pregnant with Oscar. One morning I lifted Zachary out of his car seat and ruptured a disc in my back.

Heavily pregnant, all I could do to manage the pain was lie in bed. This left me dependent on my husband Chris for everything. After our son's birth and my subsequent back surgery, I faced a long recovery. Our

church came to the party and a group of friends and strangers were rostered to care for me and our kids while Chris went back to work. I was grateful, most of the time, except when people did things differently to the way I would. I had also lost control over what food I ate, when I ate it, what clothes I wore, when I had visitors and how long they stayed, - you get the picture. I wasn't used to being dependent upon other people. I was much more comfortable giving help than receiving it. I was used to being in control and now I wasn't. Over several months this 'back to front' experience taught me two things: to truly listen to other people and hear what they didn't say with their words and second, to relinquish the control of always being the giver and be honour people by receiving from them. I will forever remember the tears of an older single women (who would loved to have her own family) as she held 2 week old Oscar in her arms as she bathed him. "Nobody", she said, "has ever given me this privilege".

Another way to unblock your ears is to expose yourself, or better your children, to a first hand experience of a way of living without the privileges you are used to.

When Oscar was 16, he accompanied his Dad on a World Vision trip to Cambodia. They visited the killing fields but also the healthy communities that had found hope after the devastation caused by the Khymer Rouge. What had the most impact on Oscar was a former street kid who had been taken into a WV Hostel. Each night he returned to the streets to teach his friends what he'd learnt at school that day. After he finished, he would bring out a set of nail clippers and I silence clip the fingernails and toenails of each child. Something we would never have thought was important.

Not everybody can travel overseas, but all of us can find ways of exposing our children and ourselves to life outside 'Epsom'.

The **ultimate ‘back to front day’** of course is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

What could your “back to front” day, week, life look like?

Inevitably it is going to mean getting out of your comfort zone, - i
It could include:

- who you choose to talk to at the end of this service
- Where you spend your money this week?
- Where you choose to volunteer?
- Who you pray for?

As followers of Jesus we have signed up to this ‘back to front’ kingdom, where the first shall be last, where God speaks through children, where death is no longer the end of the story. And where a women first encountered the risen Lord.