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The Demon-Possessed Woman

Four Scandalous Women Who Changed the World

John 20:1-18

Pastor Bryan Clark

Life in the Loop Video (Testimony from Tani):

I was really close to my sister; she is a year older than me. Tracy and I went to the Wednesday night little Bible study and of course Tracy took it real seriously; she was a believer real early on. I wasn't interested really in understanding it. And then in high school, about my sophomore year, that's when I discovered parties and stuff. We'd start Monday preparing and planning what party we were going to go to and also what we were going to tell our parents. And so I think I became a really good, like master, at lying.

So then I went to the university, followed Tracy here. Of course I did go to parties and drink a lot. Tracy dragged me to church. A lot of times I had been up all night and just made it home in time or to the hall, in time to get ready. And she wouldn't know that. I mean I'd be so tired and have a headache with the music and sometimes have to excuse myself and go throw up. Tracy never knew the extent, ever, and neither did anybody.

So I moved to Kansas City for some more schooling. I guess I was just going further, further away then, because I made just way worse choices than I had, even at the university. I just was looking for as high as I could go, mainly. I did a lot drug use and going home with people at the end of the night. And eventually I thought it was okay to start taking money from those guys. That was working out good, I thought…for a while. That lasted probably a couple of years. And then I ended up getting pregnant with this guy and so…got an abortion. I felt…dirty, definitely, and ashamed…...

Pastor Bryan:

Vik Muniz grew up in poverty, running in the streets of Brazil, and through a really strange set of circumstances ended up being able to go to New York City. Over time he demonstrated himself to be a world-class artist—ended up in a penthouse with really everything the world has to offer. His specialty in art was taking unusual material objects—everyday objects—and turning them into pieces of art. You might say his specialty was taking everyday ordinary trash and turning it into masterpieces of art. His specialty is what gave birth to a vision born out of kindness and compassion.

He got the idea of going back to Brazil. He identified the largest garbage dump in the city of Rio de Janeiro, where roughly twenty-five hundred people known as "pickers" lived. They survived by sorting through the trash. When Muniz was looking at the garbage dump on a map, he made the comment, "Even geographically, this is the end of the road." It's the end of the road for everything that is discarded, that is wasted, that is used up, that has no more value…including the people." His vision was: Could he leave his penthouse and, for a matter of years, live among the trash people and help them get a vision that the trash could actually be masterpieces? He believed that if he could change how they view the trash, it might be one step toward changing how they view themselves. A

beautiful vision, born out of compassion and kindness. But you know Muniz was not the first person to have such a vision. Somebody had thought of that before.

She had grown up in a thriving little town, seacoast town, by the name of Magdala. From all we know, she was resourceful—relatively well off. But she had one significant liability—she was an outcast, a reject. People thought she had gone mad; they thought she had lost her mind; they thought she was crazy. In reality she had become overcome by the forces of darkness. She had seven demons that possessed her. These forces of darkness had turned her days into nightmares. In the culture in which she lived, to have these demons was not just to be degraded, it was to be defiled. The people did not know whether or not what she had was contagious, so she was an outcast. She was removed from public gatherings; she was removed from social gatherings; she was forbidden to attend public worship; she had been tossed aside into the trash heap of life. Her days were days of hopelessness and despair—until she met the man who changed her life. A man who, years before Vik Muniz, had had the same vision to enter into the trash and to find that which had been discarded, that which had been used and abused, and turn them into beautiful pieces of art. His name was Jesus. The woman was Mary of Magdala. We know her better today as Mary Magdalene.

When you think of Mary Magdalene, I find it interesting that two thousand years later, there are still people determined to *trash* her. How would you like it if two thousand years later people are still starting vicious rumors about you that simply are not true? Mary Magdalene was never the wife of Jesus. There's absolutely not a shred of evidence that she was ever a prostitute or an adulteress. There is one thing that two thousand years later she should be remembered for—of all the people on the face of the planet in the first century—she was the very first witness to the greatest moment in human history. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to John, Chapter 20.

What we do know about Mary Magdalene is that she grew up in the city of Magdala and she was possessed by seven demons. But when she encountered Jesus, Jesus set her free and she became a relentless disciple of Jesus. We know that she was with Jesus in his last descent to Jerusalem. We know she was present during the mock trial. We know that she was present—one of the few disciples present—at the crucifixion. And she was one of fewer still that actually cared for the body of Jesus. She was part of the small group that took the body down, that carried the body to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and laid it there. At one time her life had been defined by hopelessness and despair, but Jesus had set her free. Her days were filled with hope. Her days were filled with someone who finally loved her. And just about the time she probably was believing that this could all really be true, He was arrested; He was crucified and He was buried. At the end of Chapter 19 one could only imagine the depth of the emotion that Mary and others were feeling. We pick up the story then in Chapter 20, verse 1:

> **Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.** (*NASB, John 20:1)

Now a couple of things there: The Jewish people mourned for three days officially when someone died. It was their belief that the soul remained with the body for three days and then the soul would depart. Jesus would have been placed in the grave on Friday. Because of the Sabbath laws she could not have visited on the Sabbath. This is now early Sunday morning, so early it's still dark, so early the sun hasn't even come up. But she can't wait another moment. She must go to mourn the One who had changed her life.

Now over the years people have proposed various theories to explain away the resurrection of Christ. One of those theories is that everyone simply went to the wrong tomb. But we know for a fact that Mary Magdalene was among that small group who actually cared for the body of Jesus, who actually laid the body in the tomb. There's no question she had the right tomb. Mary shows up early in the morning and she finds out that the stone has been rolled away and the body is gone.

Verse 2:

> **So she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved,** *(which would be John—that's consistently how John refers to himself in his own gospel)* **and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.**

Mary goes the only place she can imagine. She goes back to the disciples of Jesus. One can only imagine the depth of the pain that Peter was in. The last eye-to-eye contact he had with the One who had changed his life, as far as we know, was that moment when he denied the Christ. And he would live with that agony the rest of his life. John was busy caring for the mother of Jesus. This had to have been just the most despairing, emotionally desperate group. Mary knows nowhere else to go, so she goes to them and she tells them that they've taken the body of Jesus. **They** probably is referring to the religious leaders—those who were so determined to eliminate Jesus. She refers to her group in a plural, which tells us that she was not alone when she visited the tomb. As a matter of fact, if you read the other gospel accounts, she was not alone. But John determines to focus on Mary alone out of that group. So she tells them the story. Verse 3:

> **So Peter and the other disciple** *(meaning John)* **went forth, and they were going to the tomb. The two were running together;** (Vs. 3-4a)

Now one thing that we would not necessarily note in our twenty-first century, where we run everywhere, is in the first century culture it was very unusual to run in public. As a matter of fact, when you look at the story of the prodigal son, one of the things we notice that is so dramatic in the story is that the father *runs* to the son. And what makes it so dramatic is nobody did that in the first century culture. So clearly John, by talking about Mary **running** to Peter and John and Peter and John **running** back to the tomb, is emphasizing just kind of the frantic, chaotic nature of this whole event. There's certain intensity he certainly wanted to capture here.

> **So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first; and stooping and looking in, he saw…** *(That's a Greek word that means that he just kind of peeked into the tomb.)***…he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth which has been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.** (Vs. 3-7)

In typical fashion, when Peter gets there, you get the impression he kind of pushed John aside and in he went. The Greek word used for Peter, when it says Peter **saw,** is a completely different Greek word. It means to *scrutinize*; it means to *examine*; it means to really *take in this scene*. He describes the linen cloth as **lying there**—the place where Jesus had been laid—as if the body had just

miraculously disappeared out of the linen cloths. Now it's really important to understand that, if someone had indeed stolen the body, they wouldn't rewrap everything there. If Jesus had somehow come back to life, he wouldn't have unwrapped Himself. The evidence overwhelmingly suggested the body had just simply disappeared out of the linen cloths.

The **face-cloth** is not so much a cloth that goes around the head like some sort of a mummy. It's a cloth that typically would be tied under the chin and around the top of the head, and the function was to keep the mouth shut during burial. So when it says it was wrapped up, the nature of the language here carries more the idea that it had been taken off and carefully **rolled up** like some sort of bandage that was just neatly set aside—all of the appearance that whoever had been buried there had somehow miraculously moved through the burial cloths, wound up this face-cloth and had disappeared. That's how John describes it. Verse 8:

> **So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and he believed. For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again to their own homes.** (Vs. 8-10)

When it says John **believed**, it's a little hard to figure out what exactly did he believe? Because the very next verse says they really **did not yet understand**. There are those who would put forth the theory that the disciples stole the body in order to make it look like Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. But those people don't understand that that makes no sense when you realize the disciples did not expect a resurrection. As a matter of fact, no first century Jewish person would have expected a literal bodily, physical resurrection from the dead. The disciples did not understand that's what the Old Testament had predicted. They did not understand that's what Jesus had said He would do. There wasn't a one of them that was imagining that as a remote possibility. Even having seen the evidence, they still didn't know what to think. So they go back and they think about it. The one who remains is Mary. Verse 11:

> **But Mary was standing outside the tomb, weeping;**

When it says **weeping** there, the Greek word means *wailing*. It means she's heaving. This isn't shedding a few tears. This is a woman totally broken in her grief. If it wasn't bad enough that they had mutilated and executed the One whom she loved, the One who had set her free, now to add insult to injury, they have stolen the body. She just had nothing left. She's weeping and wailing.

> **And so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.** (Vs. 11b-12)

Now there's no indication that Mary views them as angels, which is not at all unusual. There are multiple appearances in both the Old and New Testament where angels appear, and people don't necessarily understand them to be angels. They can have a very human-like appearance. Verse 13:

> **And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"** (Vs. 13a)

Very interesting question given what had transpired—the mutilation and execution of One whom she deeply loved. He'd been put in a grave and now the grave is empty and they ask the most insensitive question imaginable. That sounds like the type of the question someone like me would

ask (laughter)—a very insensitive clod, "Hey why are you crying?" But the nature of the question is this: "Mary, you've seen the evidence. If you understood what has actually happened here, this is not a day for weeping. This is a day for unimaginable joy!" Can you imagine being those angels, knowing in a matter of seconds she was going to have her world rocked? She would go from the depth of her grief to the most unimaginable joy! And it's all captured in the question, **"Why are you weeping?"**—because you don't really know what's happened here.

> **She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around, and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.** (Vs. 13b-14)

Now there are various theories as to *why*, but I don't think this is hard to understand at all. It's still dark; she's in the garden; she's at the intensity of her grief; she's wailing. She probably glanced up; she saw a figure; she would never imagine that that was the resurrected Christ. She just didn't realize that's who it is.

> **Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"** (Vs.15a)

The exact same question—which tells us this is a calculated question to teach us some theology. And the theology is: This was not a day for weeping! If Mary understood what had actually happened, she would realize this is a day for celebration; it's not a day for weeping. Again that's the nature of the question.

> **"Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away."** (Vs.15)

This is very consistent with what we know of Mary Magdalene. This was a woman who was determined. This was a woman who was resourceful. Here she is: it's dark; she's alone in the garden. If the gardener will just say, "This is where the body is," she herself will go get it and somehow she'll get the body back into the tomb. That's kind of the heartbeat of what she says. Whatever it takes, she'll do this for the One whom she loved.

> **Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and to your Father, and My God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her.** (Vs.16-18)

Jesus calls out her name and, in that moment, she realizes this is the resurrected living Christ—that somehow he had risen from the dead. Now just reading the text, it sounds rather matter of fact. It sounds like she kind of looks at him and says, "Oh, hey, Teacher, nice to see you this morning!" But when Jesus says, "**Stop clinging to me,"** that's the clue. That's a very good translation. Basically the idea is Mary, in her overwhelming joy, had grabbed a hold of Jesus in such a way she would never let go again. The nature of the verb here is she was clinging to Him and she wouldn't let go and Jesus is trying to pry her off because she has a job to do. When Jesus says, "Stop clinging to me," what he was basically saying is, "Mary, you are going to have to let go." What Jesus was

saying is, "I am not going to just turn around and disappear. I'm not going to ascend right now. I have a job for you. Your job is to go tell the others that I am alive. Soon I am going to ascend and so they need to come and we are going to gather and we are going to see one another. There is a little bit of time before I ascend to be with the Father." That's the most logical explanation because that's exactly then what follows. So Mary Magdalene gets the assignment to go back and to announce that Jesus is alive.

Can you imagine that? I mean I've done lots of funerals and I've never had the privilege of being able to enter into a room where the family is grieving the loss of someone they deeply cared about with the message that, "By the way, your loved one is alive." I can't imagine a more beautiful message to deliver. The disciples had to have been emotionally wasted with the grief and the heartache and the confusion over what had transpired. And of all the people on the face of the planet, Mary Magdalene, a somewhat scandalous woman, was chosen to be the one to deliver the message: "Jesus is alive and He wants to see you!"

One of the things that is very important to note is that, if John had been fabricating a story in order to perpetuate this idea that Jesus is actually God and had risen from the dead, anyone that understands anything about first century culture knows that if that story was fabricated and intended to be credible, you would never, never, never have a woman as the first witness. In a first century culture, women were greatly devalued. They were considered unreliable and untrustworthy to the degree that women actually were forbidden to testify in a court of law. Now if you were making up a story that you expected to be credible, you would never have a woman as the first witness. The only reason why John would record such an event is because that's exactly the way it transpired.

And when you think about it, isn't that just like God? In the greatest moment in human history, He would choose a somewhat scandalous woman to be the first witness to declare that Jesus is alive—because God has always been in the business of using the most unlikely people to change the world.

Why does John tell this story? We don't have to guess; he tells us in verse 31:

> **…but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,** *(He's the Messiah! He's the Savior!)* **the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.**

The vision of Vik Muniz is a beautiful vision, I think born out of kindness and compassion. But at the end of the day, all he was really able to offer was a moment of dignity and a moment of hope. But two thousand years earlier someone had a similar vision—that God would become flesh and He would enter into the trash heap, to seek and to save those who were lost, those who were outcast, those who were forgotten, those who were despairing, those who were lonely, those who were self-righteous, those who were arrogant, those who have been abused, those who have been used. And He would reach into the trash heap and He would make a beautiful masterpiece of His grace. When Jesus offered salvation, it wasn't hope for a moment—it was life forever!

This morning, I don't know your story. I don't know where you've come from. I don't know where you've been. I don't know what you've done. I don't know what's been done to you. I would just ask you the question this morning, *"Why are you weeping?"* The greatest story in the history of mankind has been told and, if you understand what's being offered—no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, no matter how much you feel like

you've been discarded onto the trash heap of life—God specializes in reaching into the stuff and taking that which the world considers to be trash and making you into treasure. If you believed that Jesus died on the cross in payment for your sins, was buried and rose again, he offers life as a gift of His grace now and forever. Why are you weeping? Jesus is alive!

> *Our Father, we are thankful this morning for the wonder of Your grace. Lord, there are probably people here this morning that feel somewhat like Mary felt. Lord, there really was no hope. Lord, there're many who feel like they have been forgotten, discarded, and used, and abused, and tossed aside. Lord, they wonder how a God like You could ever love them. Lord, I pray this morning that You would open up their hearts to hear the message. The story has been told that they might believe and, by believing, they might have life now and forever. Lord, we are thankful that You came to the mess that we have made and You reached into the trash in order to make a treasure. Lord, we thank you for that in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Conclusion of Tani's Life Video:

I moved back to Lincoln and started dating a different guy and found out I was pregnant again. So now I was panicking and I started reading lots of books and then, hearing about the statistics of single parent homes kids grow up in—higher drug use eventually and just—it looked bad. In the books I was reading it said if the mom—if she takes the child to church—that will kind of offset the negative effects of not having the dad in the home. So I started going to church again—come in fast and leave fast—because…I was embarrassed. So I had a lot of shame and guilt.

Really the way I started taking it seriously was getting involved then eventually with some church families and then seeing the way they lived. That's what turned the corner. There was something really different about them. And then I started opening up to them and they showed so much grace. I didn't have to hide things.

And they suggested I start listening to Christian radio—so I did—and I really started to get it. I would be listening to a certain sermon and I would just break down and cry and pull over and just think, "Wow, so God knows everything about me and He still loves me." So I just prayed, "I surrender; take all of me." And so in His own blood for me, He went to the cross. I wish everybody knew that. He did that for you and me. And He has forgiven all of that. So that's hard to believe—some of the horrors that I did—that He is able to forgive all of that. So you kind of can start new and fresh. That's pretty amazing.

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