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Close Encounters with Jesus: Mary in the Garden

John 20:1-18

<<Singing the theme tune from Close Encounters of the Third Kind>> Before ET. Before the rest of the Star Wars films. Before Alien. Before Predator, Independence Day, Men in Black, or X-Files, there was... Close Encounters of the Third Kind. What a great movie! Remember how half of Richard Dreyfus' face was sunburned? Remember the Hare Krishnas singing that song? Remember the mashed potatoes? Remember the little boy in front of the door? And Devil's Tower? Of course, if you were 11 like I was, you remember the order: Close Encounters of the First Kind meant the simple sighting a UFO. Close Encounters of the Second Kind meant there was physical evidence. And Close Encounters of the Third Kind meant...CONTACT! Contact with the supernatural. How many read last month about the Close Encounter here in Dexter in 1966, when the farmer saw the UFO land, and the government officials came, and pretty soon, they officially declared it 'swamp gas', even though the witnesses weren't your typical nutcases.

We're here today because Easter itself was a close encounter. It was, and still is, contact with mystery—with the supernatural. If there's one thing people want to know, and, I think, want to believe in, it would be the supernatural, the Close Encounter of the Third Kind, that God has made contact with humanity by making Jesus victor over death, and you and I can put our faith in him and claim him as Lord and Master over life, death, and all of creation. And it changes everything, this close encounter...

Actually, Easter is really a close encounter of the *second* kind: evidence. No one can say what happened *inside* the tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Which means that they are no better off than us, given that we have all arrived "after the fact" also. Clearly, Jesus was *not* in the tomb. Now, if I had written this, Jesus would have stayed put, so that everyone could come and see for themselves. But that is *not* what *God* did. So let's look at this close encounter of the BEST kind, between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden:

NIV John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes, 11 but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 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." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 "Woman," he said, "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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am

returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." 18 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.

John 20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

- Three days earlier, the world had beaten righteousness and truth to death, when they tortured and killed Jesus of Nazareth.
- John picks it up “*while it was still dark*”. It’s kind of comforting to think that Easter begins in the dark—a spiritual state of mind, as well as a time of day.
- Mary arrived, saw the stone was moved, and must have thought “grave robbers!” Someone snatched the body! (Invasion of the Body Snatchers—another classic UFO plot?)
- What Mary didn’t know was, on her way to the tomb, she had left the old world behind. The old world, where:
 - War is a constant reality, and millions of people live their lives forcibly displaced from their homes.
 - Millions of people live their whole lives in fear.
 - She left the old world where death grabs even our youth and children.
 - Where people live lives hurt and broken by sin, and those same hurting people hurt other people.
 - The old world is where God is distant, God is absent, or at least God can be put in a box. (None of this close encounters stuff we’ve been talking about over the last 2 months).
- So, where was Mary? She’d come to the Ground Zero of a whole new reality, in which Satan, sin, and death lost. She had entered the new world, where death itself had been undone. But she didn’t know it yet...
- She saw the stone and was just worried about the Body...
- Notice that her worst fears came when she hadn’t even seen. How quick we are to fear!

2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

- Hm - Getting to the tomb is one thing. Going in is another...

6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes, 11 but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

- The men go back to their homes. They leave! How typical. (I beat you to it!) Mary stayed around to find out more. How about you? Have you stuck around long enough to experience it? Close encounters don’t often happen when you’re sprinting at top speed from one place to the next.
- It was only then that Mary stoops to see. God’s messengers ask Mary: “Why are you weeping?” and God asks you today: What are you crying for? What do *you* cry for? Is it for the same things that break God’s heart? Or is it for things that really don’t matter?
- And Mary sees the angels, the messengers, sitting. For once, the angels are seated. The only time in all creation the angels sit. In every other account, the angels are going, announcing, and going again. But here they are sitting down. Could it be perhaps, it was because the whole job—God’s divine plan from the beginning of creation was done? Now, Mary Magdalene didn’t realize this. So she says:

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

- Your tears can blind you, can’t they? Even to Jesus.

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."

- *"Thinking he was the gardener"...*Really, she's not far off. You and I were originally created for a Garden, the Garden of Eden. And in His parables, Jesus makes himself the dresser of the vineyard, the gardener. And here's Mary, on the day of the New Creation, seeing Jesus as the Gardener.
- Death entered the first Garden because Adam thought *he* was the gardener, rather than God. And this day death is destroyed, with Mary seeing Christ as the Gardener. How do *you* see Jesus Christ today?

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

- The pain from our grief and our tears can keep us from seeing the only One who truly can meet us in our pain. And when you realize your name is on His lips, you truly see.
- But then Jesus says, *"Don't hold on to me..."* Now *that* sounds strange. Is Jesus being uncaring? (I always thought he was supposed to be touchy-feely, like Kum-ba-ya.) But that's not it.
- I think he's saying "This (physical encounter) is not my real presence for you any more. A new relationship will begin, and my Spirit will enter you and be with you always. He says *"Go instead to my brothers..."* Notice that he calls his disciples "my brothers." He'd called them friends before, but now they're family! When *you* put your faith in Jesus, you enter into a whole new family, with God as your heavenly, true Father.
- Mary's new responsibility was to testify that he's alive! Hers was a close encounter of the best kind, because of Easter it never ends! Jesus was alive, and she was changed! Still today, Jesus is alive, and we too can be changed!

18 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.

- *"I have seen the Lord."* She doesn't describe him, or defend herself, or analyze her feelings. *"I have seen the Lord, and this is what he said to me."*
- He rose. If it is true, there's nothing left to say. If it is not true, there is nothing left to say. For believers and unbelievers both, life has never been the same again. For some, neither has death.
- If you think about it, Mary was the second person raised from the dead that morning. Death isn't the end! Jesus has come to you today to offer you real life and the adventure that awaits. He offers you "a new hope" and a love of another kind. All fear is gone.

Some of you are here because you've had a close encounter of the *first* kind: that is, you've heard of someone seeing something; but you've never experienced him. And you're curious. Others of you are here because you've had a close encounter of the *second* kind: you know someone. You've seen evidence of a changed life. Evidence of faith, and hope, and love. Something that's not easy to explain away. And *you're* wondering, could this be true for me? Many of you are here because you've had a close encounter of the *third* kind: CONTACT. And you can't go back. And you celebrate! Still others are a breath away, you're a few heartbeats away from allowing yourself to experience this close encounter of the third kind, and today, April 16th, 2//6, Easter morning is your day. Death has been destroyed. Steven Spielberg got it right this time; *"We are not alone!"* No matter what road you're on, no matter where you've come from,...won't you allow God to come in contact with you, that the riches of his resurrection power may be yours? Won't you dare risk a Close Encounter of the best kind?