

Better Than Back To Normal

Easter 2021

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on April 4, 2021

I wonder if you have had this experience in the last year: you are about to socialize with someone outside your household and you have all the precautions in place—mask, distanced chairs, outside, etc.—but then as soon as they arrive you find yourself, all of the sudden instinctively going in for a hug or a handshake. In that blissful millisecond you are free. Covid isn't real. The accumulated wounds of the last year have temporarily evaporated. And then it comes crashing down. Your friend recoils in horror at just how reckless and insensitive you have just been, initiating what these days basically amounts to Russian Roulette. You feel that warm-headed rush of shame and for a moment you wish you could crawl into the nearest closet. The awkwardness passes, but you think to yourself: *What is this world that we're living in?*

I think Mary Magdalene knows somewhat how you feel. Mary, remember, is someone who has herself experienced great suffering at the hands of a disease. She had been possessed by not one, not two, but seven demons. But that disease led to a confrontation with Jesus that set her life on a new path. She became a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, not only the healer of her body but then also the Savior of her soul, and soon the orienting center of her entire existence. Until the unthinkable happened. He who could heal all wounds refused to save himself and was instead put to death on a cross for the whole world to see. And this new life of Mary's came to a crossroads.

It's a crossroads that brings her to that first Easter morning, when she comes to the grave of her beloved to grieve. And she is totally alone. You see, Mary is a picture of us in more ways than one. Covid has been a double-edged instrument of our torment, for not only has it taken from us so many lives, it has also robbed us of our capacity to properly grieve those we have lost. We have all been forced to grieve alone. Mary, grieving alone, must be thinking: *Does no one else care? Does no one else know?*

But then there he is. Alive. *How is this possible? He just called me by name! It's really him! What was lost has been found, what was dead is now alive, a future that seemed impossible to bear without him is now is brimming with hope again.* And caught up in the moment, without thinking, she runs and reaches out her arms to embrace her best friend and her Lord and Jesus says, "No. Do not hold onto me."

Mary surely felt like crawling into the nearest closet. And this is worse than our case. This is beyond awkwardness, for there is no readily communicable deadly disease floating in the air that Mary has temporarily forgotten about. This is just pain—bewildering, uncomprehending pain. Mary must be thinking *What is this world that I'm living in?*

Why does Jesus hold Mary at arm's length? Why shut down this cinematic moment of sweet reunion?

Mary, understandably, is just desperate for things to go back to normal. She has just lived through the defining trauma of her life and all of the sudden she is presented with the possibility that it actually didn't even happen at all. Or that it has been exactly reversed. That everything can go back the way it was.

And Jesus is saying to Mary: *Actually, this isn't what you think. I'm not here to stay. Things are not going back to normal. Actually, things now are so deeply, so fundamentally different that it's impossible for you to even comprehend how in this moment. Yes, I am alive, but I will soon ascend back to my Father, and you will have to figure out what it means to follow me without me here. But listen—this is the most important part—and I know it will be hard to believe, but trust me when I say what comes next is better.*

We, very understandably, just want things to go back to normal too. We have suffered greatly. We are, right now, suffering greatly. It is true that the fallout from the pandemic has been unevenly distributed, especially along economic and racial lines, but it's also true that I don't know anyone who is doing great. We are all walking wounded. And many of us in secret.

And it is, of course, perfectly appropriate and good for us to long for things to be back to normal. I am dying to hug my friends. Desperate for family to meet our baby. I can't wait for that unending hum in the back of my mind that is constantly measuring six feet, constantly scanning for noses escaped from masks, to finally die out. And these past few weeks have given us reasons for genuine hope. Cases on the decline. Vaccinations on the rise. Grandparents allowed to visit grandchildren. Stimulus money in our bank accounts.

But the challenge this Easter puts before us is the same challenge that Jesus puts before Mary Magdalene: What if I told you it could be better than normal? Or to put it more provocatively, Is normal really all you want to wish for? Do y'all remember 2019? Or the year before that? Do you recognize this new habit of ours of identifying every successive year as worst year of all time? Have we forgotten the partisan squawking? The systemic racism? The epidemics of sexism and sexual assault? Is it any surprise that in the first weeks of several states aggressively reopening we have seen not one but two mass shootings? Is that really what we're desperate to return to? What if I told you we didn't have to?

Is it possible that this global tragedy—this thing we never wished for in the first place and very much wish never happens again—could also actually be the thing that wakes us up and sets us on a new course in life?

What Jesus is saying to Mary, what Jesus is saying to us, is that he wasn't raised from the dead so that everything could go back to the way it was before. God didn't send his Son to make the world into the Garden of Eden again. God sent his Son so that everything that happened after the Garden of Eden, including all our sins and all the world's brokenness, including this global pandemic even, so that all that could be folded into a new, bigger, better, and more beautiful story of redemption. One in which sins are really forgiven. One in which grace never runs out. One in which transformation is really possible. One in which a new kind of joy is possible. Most importantly, what is made possible for us by Jesus' cross and resurrection is a life that does not have to hide from death. It's a life that can stare mortality directly in the face, go through it, and be raised up in resurrected glory on the other side to live in joyful communion with God and one another in a future that never stops becoming bigger and better.

Covid won't last forever. Life around us will return to normal, maybe even very soon. But what Jesus is saying to you this morning is that yours doesn't have to. In Christ, a new life really is possible. It's not necessarily an easier life. But it is a true and beautiful one. It is not a life that avoids suffering. But it is one that makes sense of it. It not a life that avoids death. But it is one that brings resurrection on the other side. And the best part is, it's a life you can begin or begin again right now.

Amen.