

The First Witnesses

Luke 24:1-12

Series: The Climax of the Cross (Luke, Spring 2020)

Preaching Date: April 12, 2020 (Sunrise)

Worship: He is not here, but has risen!"

Key Sentence: The resurrection of Jesus is the eyewitness good news.

Outline:

Luke 24:1-12 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ²And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." ⁸And they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

Informed by:

Luke 8:1-3 Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ²and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

The First Witnesses

Luke 24:1-12

(Note: I've done this in a simplified play script style just so it will be familiar)

Cast of Characters

Pastor (Pastor) The pastor of a small Christian gathering in Galilee in the early years of the church. This church has a tradition of inviting an eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection on 'Easter' Sunday to testify to what he or she saw.

Mary Magdalene Mary was a disciple of Jesus, probably from the town of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee. She is mentioned in all four Gospels as one of several Galilean women who followed Jesus and supported him and the other disciples out of their personal means (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:2-3). Luke 8:2 adds the unique detail that Mary Magdalene had been liberated from "seven demons." John 19:25 places her at the foot of the cross. She, with other women, witnesses the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:47; Matthew 27:60-61; Luke 23:50-24:10). Matthew (28:1-10) and John (20:11-18) portray her as first witness to the resurrection. In both Matthew and John, Jesus commissions her to tell the other disciples about the resurrection (Matthew 28:10; John 20:17)

She is probably the youngest of the three women in this script, maybe 30 or so at the time of the main story (the ministry of Jesus) but more like early to mid-forties at the time of this script.

Joanna, wife of Chuza Joanna was the wife of Chuza, a steward (senior administrator) in the household of Herod. This Herod would be Herod Antipas who ruled in Galilee during the time of Jesus' ministry. Joanna and Chuza were probably a powerful and wealthy couple. Joanna was one of the women who followed Jesus and provided for him and the disciples. The only other mention of Joanna by name is in Luke 24 at the resurrection of Jesus, but I surmise for the stories sake that she was also an eyewitness to the crucifixion.

Joanna is probably in her mid-thirties at the time of the story, but more like late forties at the time of this script.

Mary, mother of James and Joseph. There were a lot of Marys in Jesus' day, and they were often distinguished by where they were from, who they had married or who their children were. This Mary is probably not mentioned in Luke 8. In Luke 24 she is called the mother of James, and it is possible this refers to "James the son of Alphaeus," one of Jesus' disciples. Thus it is possible that this Mary had been married to Alphaeus, and I assume that for this script. I also assume that "James the son of Alphaeus" is the same person as "James the Younger," which is the name used in Mark 15.

Mary is probably in her forties or at most early fifties at the time of the story (ministry of Jesus). She has two grown sons. She is in her sixties at the time of the script.

Time

Some years after the resurrection of Jesus, maybe 13-15 years later.

Initial Setting

"On the beach" at a Sunrise Service on the Sea of Galilee. The pastor walks to center stage for his opening monologue. The women are just offstage.

PASTOR:

Thanks for being here. For several years we've gathered here near the shore of the Sea of Galilee to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We try each year to have an eyewitnesses of the resurrection share with us their testimony. This year we have three. Remember, it wasn't the disciples, or any man who first heard the announcement of the Lord's resurrection. It was women who first found the tomb empty that Sunday morning and heard that he had risen. This morning we have three women here with us to share their experiences of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. The three are Mary of Magdala, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, and Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph. I'll let them come now and tell their stories.

*(the three women come to center stage and look
at each other as if uncertain who is to start)*

MARY MAGDALENE:

Thank you for inviting us here. It's a great tradition you've started. We're privileged to be invited and we're grateful that the testimony of women is honored among the followers of Jesus.

JOANNA:

We don't get to see each other very often. We were up late last night talking about when we met Jesus and why we followed him. We've noticed before that we each had a deep need that was met by Jesus, especially by his resurrection.

MARY:

We've decided to quickly tell you each of our stories. Mary will go first.

MARY MAGDALENE:

Well. I was born in the town of Magdala, a little further down the coast. My father was a coarse and cruel man, who wasted everything he earned on wine and gambling. He abused both my mother and me in ways I shudder to think about. But he left when I was young, unable to pay his taxes and on the run from the Romans.

He left us penniless. My mother couldn't provide, even by begging. But she had an aunt who had been a fortune-teller. She taught my mother to open herself to the voices, evil spirits that used her voice. Some of her predictions were uncannily accurate, especially the ones for harm or death in a person's life.

But the voices tormented her, told her she was damned and doomed. They broke her mind and her health. I tried to help her, to care for her, but before I turned fourteen, she died.

That left me on my own. There were men who would have had me, but bitterness toward my father made me claw them away like an enraged cat.

That left me only the choice my mother had made, to call the spirits into me.

Immediately they filled me, and filled me with horror. I recoiled from them with every part of my body and mind, but found I had lost control of my will. I watched as an onlooker and despised myself. I did revolting things, said things I couldn't imagine thinking, knew things I could never have known.

Those years were an endless horror. Sometimes the black things would leave me alone. Then I'd spend hours curled around myself in shame, hating what I'd become. Sometimes the spirits tormented me, accusing me, throwing me around for the pleasure of my pain. Most often they simply made me hurt others, whether by the fortunes I told or the hatred I spewed.

Then I met Jesus. He was teaching in Capernaum but went often to other towns. He came to Magdala. On a hill above the sea, he shared good news of the kingdom. He healed the sick. And the demons were outraged. They drove me staggering to the cliff edge and cried with my voice "We know who you are, Jesus of Nazareth. Leave us alone." I could sense their panic, their desire to cast me into the sea. But Jesus turned. I saw his peaceful, powerful face. "No," he said, loud but calm. "Not yours. Come out of her." One by one, shrieking, seven spirits fled my body. They left me in the dirt, but Jesus lifted me up. "Do not fear," he said, "I am here. Come, repent, and follow me." I followed and heard his words of life for three years.

JOANNA:

You were with him the whole time?

MARY MAGDALENE:

I came to Magdala at times, to tell my own people what he had done for me, but mostly I followed and listened, learned and worshiped.

JOANNA:

I wish I had been with him longer. Maybe I would have trusted him more.

(Mary nods and gestures at Joanna to go on)

As your pastor said, my name is Joanna and I'm the wife of Chuza, who was chief steward to Herod Antipas during his reign. He's a follower of the Way now, but in those days my husband, like so many others, was simply a scheming politician.

I grew up in that atmosphere. My father had been a project manager for Herod the Great, but that was not a position to be envied. Herod had control over every detail, expected complete compliance, was ruthless with those who failed, and took petty revenge like other men take meals. My father was not a bad man, but the only way to meet Herod's demands was to take bribes, make kickbacks and abuset workers.

I grew up knowing that every man was a climber, a thief and a liar, bowing only to self-interest. Every woman was a schemer, a conniver, and a backstabber.

At sixteen, as part of a deal, my father gave me away in marriage. My husband Chuza, was not a bad man. But as chief steward to Herod's son Antipas, he was a target for bribery and influence peddling. If you wanted access to the tetrarch or influence in his court, you had to go through Chuza. I despised him for it, and grew hard in heart. The evil all around me made me mistrust everyone, never believing that anyone could be counted on to keep their word or their promises.

But deep inside I was looking for that person with integrity. I became fascinated with John the Baptist, who told everyone from the Pharisees to the tax collectors, from the chief priests to the Romans, to repent and be baptized. He told the rich and influential in this world to repent, to rely on God rather than riches. John spoke against Antipas, who had married his brother's wife. You all know the story. What did John get for his integrity? He lost his head. Still, deep inside, I was impressed.

Then we began to hear of a man teaching in Galilee and performing miracles. He declared a new kind of kingdom and called people to deny themselves and follow him. Some said he was John the Baptist returned to life. When I went to hear him, he proclaimed blessing on the poor and meek, woe on the Pharisees and hypocrites. I liked what I heard but feared it was just a line to gather crowds.

But I couldn't deny the witness of my own eyes. He healed. He did miracles, for the good of others. He seemed to do it without strings attached or self-promoting theater, like everyone else I knew, like everything I saw even in myself.

I remember when a young ruler sought him out, a man of my own class. He said "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." Jesus cited the commandments, but the rich man affirmed he'd kept them all. Then Jesus said "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The man could not do it. His possessions and position bound him. Jesus said "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

I thought about that a long time. I couldn't see his gimmick, what he got out of all this. It was clear he was living the way he'd told that man to, on nothing, and not demanding anything. I think it was that that prompted me to start giving a little money to his disciples, to buy food for the group and such. I could see they were living on nothing, so I didn't feel like I was being ripped off.

MARY:

But did you believe in Jesus? Did you believe he was the Messiah?

JOANNA:

No. I hoped, more and more, but I'd seen too much politics, too much scheming. When he started to head for Jerusalem, I hoped it wasn't to pull some great political theater, to make much of himself. Everyone else served themselves. My father had. Herod always did. Even my husband. Why wouldn't Jesus?

MARY:

But didn't you see that he was different? That he was truly doing God's work? That's what attracted my son, James.

JOANNA: Tell us.

MARY: *(looking back to the crowd)*

I'm Mary. But there are so many Marys among the followers of Jesus. I am usually known as Mary the mother of James the younger. He's one of the disciples of Jesus, but usually called James the younger or the son of Alphaeus, because there are so many James's, especially the son of Zebedee, who was martyred by Antipas.

All my life I've been tormented by the deaths of those I loved. My mother, who was the strong center of our family, died suddenly when I was nine. With her death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable and secure, disappeared. My father never recovered from the loss, never spoke of it, never comforted my fears. I grew up tormented and lonely while he sank into wine and silence.

But for some reason when I came to an eligible age, he betrothed me to an olive grower named Alphaeus. It could have been a disaster, but my Alphaeus was a kind and passionate man who chose to love me. I still don't know why. He nursed me out of my shell, brought light into my life. Before too long we had two little boys, twins, James and Joseph.

Alphaeus hated oppression. His compassionate heart constantly led him to call out evil, especially the cruelties of the Romans. Eventually this led him to join with zealots, the group led by Theudas.

It was then the great fear that had consumed me at my mother's death returned.. I was paralyzed by images of my Alphaeus hung in crucifixion, or his body rotting on some field of battle. How I pleaded with him to stay, not just with me but with our six-year-old boys. But he said that the Romans must be defeated, so our sons could grow up without fear.

(she sighs deeply)

Theudas and his followers, about 400 of them, foolishly went up to Jerusalem to wrest control from the Romans. My Alphaeus went up with them. They were betrayed and ambushed outside Jericho. Many were killed, some captured. Alphaeus was one of the lucky ones who died in the battle and was spared the horror of crucifixion, but I saw the crosses along the road.

I longed then to retreat back into my shell, into loneliness and safety, but I had boys to raise, and a business to run until they came of age. I did what I had to do. Yet I wasn't surprised when, despite my cautions, they both took up their father's passion for justice, hatred of oppression, desire to help the weak and the poor. I saw him in them every day.

Joseph was the more hot-headed of the two, and when the zealot movement grew strong again, he went off, at only eighteen to learn warfare. James, the younger, was more soft-hearted, wanting to help people suffering under the oppression rather than to confront the oppressors.

James and I began to hear stories of a Jesus from Nazareth. He said he had come to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed and the captives, to bring a new and different kingdom. That appealed to James, who wanted to see swords beaten into plowshares and every man under his own vine and fig tree.

Leaving me with the olive grove, James went off to find this Jesus. Weeks later he returned, begging me to come and see this man who healed sickness and disease, who touch lepers, who fed the hungry. This must be the Messiah. No, I prayed, let this not be another violent fool like Theudas.

Suppressing my fears, I went with James, leaving a faithful steward in charge of the olive grove. And against my wishes, I too came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Yet I still feared the Romans. My other son Joseph had been gone almost four years, living with a zealot band in the wilderness. On his rare visits he and James disagreed, not about ends but about means. I did not enter their arguments, but just clung to him.

Then came the great tragedy. The Romans learned of his minor band of Zealots. They attacked them savagely and killed them to a man. My worst fears came true. Again.

What I would have done before I met Jesus I'll never know. What I did do was fled from everything to him. Fled my fears, fled my responsibilities, fled from thought itself. I spent time with Jesus and gradually gained some comfort. "Blessed are those who mourn," he said, "for they shall be comforted." As I followed, I joined with Mary, Joanna and other women who kept together for safety.

MARY MAGDALENE:

That's how we came together, following Jesus. Joanna and Mary both helped provide for Jesus and the group out of their own means, and the three of us became close friends.

JOANNA:

Months later Jesus said he was leaving Galilee. This wasn't shocking, but his prophecy was. He said we were going up to Jerusalem, and he would be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes. He foretold that they would condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. They would mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. And after three days he would rise."

MARY:

This was my worst fear. Jesus had become as dear to me as my family, the focus of my life and my hopes. Did he too have to die? And would James die with him?

JOANNA:

Did this man, this one man of integrity have to pit himself against the Romans? They were the source and center of all the political hell in the country. If he sought power they would either corrupt him or kill him – and from what he said it seemed he expected nothing else.

MARY MAGDALENE:

Unlike my friends, I was not scared or skeptical. Knowing how Jesus had rescued me from the dominion of demons and Satan, I was convinced there was nothing men could do to him. I didn't know what his prophecy meant, but it didn't sound like a defeat to me.

JOANNA:

Needless to say, we followed him to Jerusalem and saw it all. By God's providence we saw more than most of the disciples.

MARY MAGDALENE:

The first most amazing thing we saw was the resurrection of Lazarus. We weren't close up or anything, but the fact of his death was very real to us, and the fact of his resurrection was plain as day. The man was alive.

MARY:

Some of the women with us were able to talk with Martha and Mary after, and we heard what Jesus had said "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." If only I could believe that, it would answer all my fears.

JOANNA:

We saw his entry into Jerusalem, heard him called "Son of David" and "the coming king of the Jews." I could imagine how the chief priests, the Pharisees and the Roman governors would respond to that.

MARY:

The Romans were out in force because of the Passover and watched with hard-eyed attention. The Jewish leaders were full of hate toward him. It made my heart sick. How could they be so against this godly, gentle man.

JOANNA:

How could they be so against this man of integrity?

MARY MAGDALENE:

How could they be so against the work of God?

JOANNA:

It didn't really come as a surprise when Jesus was finally arrested. That there was a betrayer like Judas among Jesus' followers was almost inevitable. I'd seen men do these kinds of things countless times in the court of Antipas.

MARY:

It was awful. We saw him dragged through the streets, from the house of the High Priest to Pilate's place of judgment. We heard Pilate's weak attempt to release him, and saw the Pharisees circulating through the crowd, whispering and pointing. "Ask for the release of Barabbas. Call for the crucifixion of Jesus."

JOANNA:

And Pilate, like every political creature ever, even though he knew Jesus was innocent, bowed to the wind of political pressure and had him flogged and led away to be crucified.

MARY:

We followed. Most of the disciples had fled, but John followed with us. We saw them drive the nails into his hands. We heard the agony in his cries. We saw them lift him up on the cross, saw the anguish and suffering on his face.

MARY MAGDALENE:

I couldn't believe that even yet, even at this moment of pain and agony he would not still speak the word that would rebuke both evil men and demons and set himself free, as he had set me free.

Yet instead, as I watched I thought I could hear the mocking voices of those old black spirits, telling me I'd only been given a reprieve, theirs was the ultimate victory, soon they would have me as well.

JOANNA:

I felt myself go hard. In Jesus I had seen goodness and integrity and moral courage. But it seemed that moral courage could not win against the self-interest of evil men, living up to my lowest expectations.

MARY:

I tasted the bile of fear. Everyone I ever loved was taken from me. And this murder of Jesus surely meant that James and the disciples would be next.

JOANNA:

For hours the leaders of the people mocked him. All these political toadies stood in glee under the cross saying “Save yourself now, Jesus. Come down if you are the king of the Jews.”

MARY MAGDALENE:

Yet there were moments when the music of triumph and peace seemed to break through the chaos. Jesus was, it seemed, being mocked by the criminals on each side, but then one of them cried “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” and when Jesus said “Today you will be with me in paradise” it seemed the voices of the black spirits were muted.

MARY:

Around noon a darkness came over the place, and it seemed the sun’s light failed. I watched it with a dull terror. What worse thing was about to happen? What could be worse than this?

JOANNA:

Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” And I felt in my soul that even God, who had done so many marvelous things through this man had walked away at his moment of need.

MARY MAGDALENE:

But it was not so! Jesus said “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” Then he cried out in a loud voice “It is finished.”

And all that spirit world trembled, for though it seemed a cry of defeat, at a deeper level a chord of victory sounded forth that almost I could hear.

And he breathed his last.

MARY:

All this time we stood at a distance, watching. But now these two dragged me closer. We saw the Roman centurion pierce his side with a spear, and blood and water flow out.

He was dead. This one we had loved, served and hoped in was dead.

JOANNA:

I felt we should give him a decent burial. But what could any of us do? It was Joseph, a member of the Sanhedrin, who took down the body of Jesus. He wrapped it in a linen shroud. He brought the spices needed for burial.

MARY MAGDALENE:

We followed as he and another Jewish teacher, Nicodemus carried the body to a new cut tomb nearby, apparently Joseph's own tomb.

JOANNA:

We saw where he was laid, but by now it was nearly sunset, and the Sabbath was beginning. I had spent more time in Jerusalem than any of the other women, so I took careful note of where this tomb stood. We could do nothing on the Sabbath, of course, but when it was over we bring the spices and finish honoring Jesus' body.

MARY MAGDALENE:

We returned with the disciples to the house in the city where Jesus had taken the Passover. Most of the disciples will tell you that the next day, the Sabbath went by in a haze, but I remember it with perfect clarity. I remember the length of the hours, the sunlight through the window making a spot of light that slowly, slowly traveled across the floor.

(turning to the others)

And I remember our conversation

JOANNA:

So do I. I was so angry that day. Filled with hatred for the Romans, filled with hatred for Antipas, for Chuza, for all the men who had sold out to each other and to evil and put the last good man to death.

MARY MAGDALENE:

I understood your anger. I just didn't understand why you kept talking about giving in, giving up and going home. I was sure something more was going to happen.

MARY:

And I couldn't understand either of you. I huddled in the corner of the room with despair choking the voice out of me, choking the very life out of me. Had you never seen death, I wondered? Dead's dead. Joses and Alphaeus were dead at the hands of the oppressors, gone forever. And Jesus was just as dead. Yet you kept talking about him as if he was alive and could come back.

MARY MAGDALENE:

Because that's how it felt to me. I had seen him die, but I'd also heard his cry of victory. And unlike you two, I remembered his words. He'd not only said he would suffer and die but that he would rise.

JOANNA:

It sounded like nonsense. I'd seen the thing with Lazarus. I'd heard of others he had raised. But how could he raise himself? Dead people can't do things.

MARY MAGDALENE:

And what did I tell you?

JOANNA:

That God would surely intervene for his beloved son.

JOANNA:

(turning to audience)

Round and round we went that day: despair and anger, fear and hope. By night we had fallen into sleepless silence. When the first bare trace of dawn lit the sky I roused the others. I wanted to go and get this over with.

MARY MAGDALENE:

We picked up the bundles of spices that Joseph of Arimathea had provided and headed out of the city.

MARY:

I wondered why were even bothering. A few women couldn't possibly move the stone that had sealed the tomb.

MARY MAGDALENE:

But when we got there we were amazed to find the stone rolled away. Cautiously we approached the opening, looked inside. The slab where the body had lain was empty, except for the linen in which he'd been wrapped.

(for a few moments all three women are re-living the scene)

MARY:

Oh no, what have they done with him now? Can't they even let him lie in peace?

JOANNA:

Damn. Damn their hateful souls. Let's get out of here.

MARY MAGDALENE:

No. Wait. Something . . .

(they half turn)

JOANNA:

At that moment we became aware of two men behind us, dazzling, in white.

MARY:

Who are you? I wondered.

MARY MAGDALENE:

Angels, I whispered. I recognized them as the opposite of the black spirits who had tormented me for so many years. These were spirits of utter purity and goodness.

MARY:

We fell to the ground, overwhelmed by this presence. For once I was not the only one to fear. Yet this fear felt right, somehow.

JOANNA:

The angels said to us “Don’t be afraid.” And then “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”

MARY:

(to Mary Magdalene)

And I remember the look you gave us.

MARY MAGDALENE:

He is risen, just as he said.

JOANNA:

At that moment fear, anger and hope turned to inexpressible joy. Jesus was alive.

MARY MAGDALENE:

Jesus had conquered Satan and all his demons.

MARY:

Jesus had conquered fear and death!

MARY MAGDALENE:

Then we ran, like never before, returning to the upper room to tell all this to the eleven and all the rest.

JOANNA:

But, of course, like men, they refused to believe us. They called our words an idle tale, a women's fantasy.

MARY MAGDALENE:

But Peter, rousing himself from deep despair, rose and took John and ran to the tomb, and saw what we had seen, except for the angels.

MARY:

Later Jesus appeared to us. We were in the upper room, with the door locked, and he appeared among us. He showed us his hands, with the scars of the nails, and his side, pierced by the spear.

JOANNA:

And then we knew, finally fully and complete that he was both Savior and Lord. No matter what sinful men might do to us, Jesus had conquered sin and death. And everyone who believes in him can be freed from sin, from fear, from anger, from the enemy and receive now life with him that will never end.

PASTOR:

Amen. Thank you so much ladies. Praise God. Let's pray.