

Hallmark Family Christmas

Beginning with the End

Acts 1:8–14 (NRSV)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” **9** When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. **10** While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. **11** They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” **12** Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. **13** When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. **14** All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Introduction. One month ago a significant person in my life died, my mother. I have been blessed to have an absolutely wonderful mother. Mom loved me (I never have doubted her love), cared for me, supported me and believed in me all of my life endeavors. Mom was always there for me and my family.

I imagine that many of you can relate to what I am saying because you too had a great mother. Mothers for most of us are special people.

During the Advent/Christmas season we are going to focus on the story of Christmas through the eyes of a very special mother, Mary, mother of Jesus. What we find in the gospels about Mary shows us she supported and was there for and with Jesus. Hopefully through her eyes we can receive a clearer vision of who Jesus is and enter a deeper relationship with him.

To begin this journey with Mary, we are going to start at the end. Steven Covey in Seven Habits of Highly Effective people encouraged beginning with the end in mind. So we are going to follow that advice by looking at the end of Mary's life and her story of Jesus.

Traditions and Legends.

When I served **First Centenary UMC, the church had a special Advent tradition – “No Rehearsal Christmas Play.”** (Now I had seen some Christmas plays that appeared to have no rehearsals.) This play happened like this: On the Sunday before Christmas, the children would come dressed as their favorite Christmas character or choose the costume and then would be sent in to the stage area at the appropriate time as the Christmas story was read. It was always a delightful and moving experience as the children spontaneously acted out the narrative.

Each year the **most frequently chosen character would be “Mary, mother of Jesus.”** So the parade of characters might include 7 or 8 Marys. Of course all of us know you can't have a Nativity without Mary. Well, Mary was not only popular with the children but she holds special place in the hearts of most Christians.

But when it comes to what we actually know **about Mary from the gospels, we find little information recorded this amazing mother.** But what we find contains the richness of a story starter for Hallmark but it may not be as pretty and as predictable.

The last mention of Mary is what we find in the first chapter of Acts. Following the ascension of Jesus into heaven, Mary is named with those who return to Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit.

So what happened to Mary following Jesus' ascension? Unfortunately, we do not have any other New Testament stories of her or any reliable historical documents chronicling the rest of her story. What we have are some traditions and legends that may or may not be grounded in reality.

According to tradition, **Mary lived to be either 59 or 64 years old** before her departure from this life. According to our standards that seems she died rather young. In her day, that would have been an average life span for anyone who survived to adulthood. So it is likely she lived a normal life span. Since Mary was probably a teen ager when she became pregnant with Jesus, she may have lived 15-20 years after his death and resurrection.

As many of you know, in many sectors of **Roman Catholic understanding, Mary plays a larger than human role. Often she is referred to as Θεοτόκος,** the God bearer, as the mother of Jesus. From that tradition comes a belief that Mary did not die but was taken directly into heaven – the Assumption. In Eastern Orthodox tradition it was believed Mary fell asleep and then was taken up – dormition. As Protestants, we do not hold to either of these ideas.

There are two places which lay claim to the end of Mary's life. In a tour of holy places in Jerusalem, you can be taken to a place claimed to be Mary's tomb. A church was built in the 12th century on a site just outside the city walls in the Kedron Valley to mark her burial site.

Some believe that **Mary remained and lived in Jerusalem the remainder of her life and central to the founding of the church there.**

There are others who believe that **Mary lived out most of her life in Asia Minor near Ephesus. In the John's gospel account of the crucifixion,** Jesus gave John charge and care of his mother. So when John went to Ephesus, Mary would have likely have gone with him. In Ephesus a house was excavated that some claim was Mary's home.

I want you to know **what I have just said about Mary is speculation of her life** after the ascension of Jesus. Many find meaning in one or more of these legends but we do not have hard evidence about their validity.

It seems that one thing we can draw from what we find in Acts 1 and the traditions of Mary's life to follow is she remained connected to and engaged in the life of the community of people who followed her son. This has broad implications.

Enduring the trauma.

One of the **most moving scenes in my mind regarding Mary is a scene from the movie, "The Passion of Christ" following Jesus being flogged and beaten.** Mary, who had witnessed the most gruesome scene of Jesus being whipped and then drug away, goes to the place where he was beaten. She begins to clean up his blood on the ground. That scene gives every viewer a glimpse into the trauma Mary encountered as the mother of Jesus.

The gospels do not tell us whether Mary actually witnessed the flogging of her son but the writers do tell us she was present at the crucifixion. It seems clear that Mary was fully aware of the depth of suffering her son encounter and was a witness to his death.

Most of us would agree that life should be that one's children never precede the death of the parents. When this is reversed, the trauma experienced by the parents is extraordinary.

Over twenty years ago I was witness to this type of trauma experienced by a mother. To this day, I can still feel what I saw. One Sunday morning our youth were scheduled to sing in worship. When **one of the key youth leaders failed to show, some wonder where she was. A little later in the early service,** I got news she and her father had been in an accident and both had been killed. I immediately left the church to go to be with the family. The pain and shock in the face of the mother has been forever seared on my mind. When I dwell on it even today, I am moved with grief.

The trauma Mary experienced was enormous. When she witnessed her son experiencing a torturous and unjust death and could do nothing about it. She was a witness of him dying and then being taken from the cross. Those memories had to be seared onto her mind and I imagined often returned in her dreams.

Then three days later, Mary heard that Jesus had been raised. (RC traditions says that Jesus actually went to her first before he appeared to Mary Magdalene. Of course, nothing in scripture collaborates this.) Then for a 40-day period of time, Jesus was appearing to his followers.

Then the final scene Mary who no doubt wants Jesus to remain to be with her is a witness as **Jesus ascends into the sky. This, too would have left a sense of trauma.** There is no doubt that the trauma and pain Mary experienced from the crucifixion to the ascension of Jesus was over the top.

Trauma and pain are a common human experience. Most of us will go through traumatic events and experience which will torment our minds and hearts for extended periods of time.

- Like Mary, it could be the death of a child.
- It could be the death of a spouse or a parent.
- It could be failure of a marriage.

- It could be abuse and harassment at the hands of someone one with power.
- It could come through persistent discrimination.
- It could be the product of a betrayal or loss of job. Our traumas can come from multiple sources and have a huge impact on us.

How do you live through and find healing through the traumas of life? While I believe there are multiple resources one can tap into which are vital, one that Mary had seems central. She remained connected to and engaged in the community of people who believed in her son.

For people who follow Jesus and are engaged in a community of faith, traumas often bring a temptation to drop out or drift away. Often it is painful to return. But yet it is the midst of the Jesus community where healing takes place.

I want to take a personal moment to express how much you have meant to me following Mom's death. The day following her death, I posted a story on Facebook. Some 250 of you expressed your love and prayers. Since her death, I have received a steady stream of cards from you. The stack is large. I can't tell you how much your expressions of love have meant to me. They are helping me through my grief.

When you experience trauma, stay engaged. This community is precious and is an agent of healing because Jesus lives among us.

Staying engaged in the mission.

From what we hear of Mary in the NT and even the legends support another critical aspect of her connection with Jesus.

From the gospels, we really get the sense Mary supported his ministry. She was often seen as part of the traveling team. While she may not have always understood what he was he was about, she was supportive. So when we hear that Mary was still engaged with the community of believers after the crucifixion and resurrection, we see her continued support of the ministry her son had established. She continued to give herself in ministry for what Jesus had died to do.

Of course we are not certain as to how she carried this out. We have the comments here that with the others she was devoted to prayer. We have no other historical details offered. She may have been an outspoken evangelist for Jesus' mission or she may have been one who was more in the background who provided a critical undergirding for the ministry. Whatever the case, she remained supportive and engaged.

Her example is one I believe we are called to follow. Some among us are folks who are on the front lines of encounter others and sharing the good news of Jesus. Some work to care for needs of others in the name of Jesus and are actively seen in those ministries. Others are more in the background. Of course there are seasons when one's approach looks different. But remaining engaged is so critical to the mission of Jesus to save the lost.

During this season of the pandemic, church life has been flipped on its head. I have often wondered what will church life be like when "normal" gathering in person returns. I wonder what will need to be rebuilt. I wonder will we have losses and who will they be. Who has remained engaged?

In a season like we are enduring, it's not easy to remain engaged but it is so vital for us personally as well as the ministry Jesus has called us to do. People still need Jesus and the healing touch He brings. He still wants to use our hands and feet in doing so.

We can follow in Mary's footsteps and remain engaged and connected to Jesus and his mission through involvement in the community of his followers. During this Advent season, let us renew our commitment to him and to his family.