

Have you ever felt like you were drowning?
Maybe you have been at the beach somewhere
like the Gulf Coast when you went out a little
too far past where you could stand on your tippy toes
and started to get scared as the current pulled you out further?
And you were desperate to find anything
to cling to so that you could save yourself?

I can remember growing up going to Nashville shores

and they had one of the big wave pools
that churned out waves one after another.
And you could watch all kinds of people
reacting differently to those waves.
Some kids were fierce and brave,
running into them and then being knocked over backward.
Their parents were oblivious to their fate.

**There were the teenagers going deeper and deeper,
thinking they could handle anything,**

and then a wave took them under in their overconfidence.
And there were the adults on their floats
just riding each wave out as they kept talking.
And around the edges of the pool stood the lifeguards,
ready to save those struggling
and overwhelmed by the waves.
They had everything they needed to jump in and save.
They were lifesavers.

In today's text from John,
Mary Magdalene needed a lifesaver now more than ever,
as she had lost her Lord and lived through his death.
She has come to pay her last respects and show him care.
And that is where our story begins today

11 Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. 12 She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. 13 The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him."

Great.

Now she doesn't even have his body left
to give her meaning and save her life.

Things just couldn't get any worse.
Have you experienced that at some point in your life
when things just keep getting poured on you,
one after another after another,
until it feels like you are just treading water?

14 As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, " Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Whether Jesus didn't look like himself,
or his face was turned,
or like most of us when we are frazzled,
Mary just couldn't make sense of what she was hearing, who knows.
The answer is all the above.

16 Jesus said to her, " Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

Jesus called out to Mary with his transforming voice.
Just saying her name made all the difference,
and she affectionately called him her teacher.
She obviously wanted to touch him again,
hug him, hold him just like the old days.
She was saved!
He was here and is alive, and now things
will be the way they used to be.
Don't we all often want to go back to the past
when things were sure and certain, or so we thought.
But that was not to be for Mary.
And most of the time for us.
We can't go back to the past.
We only have the present and the future.

17 Jesus said to her, " Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Don't hold on to me, Jesus said.
That seems to me to be a strange thing to say, doesn't it?
Here is Mary, who is desperately trying
to cling to Jesus and have her life saved.

She doesn't realize that by letting him go, her life will be saved.

Several years ago, we were on one of our summer trips, and we stopped at what is called a life-saving station in the Great Lakes.

These were everywhere along the coasts before the Coast Guard was established in 1915. And their symbol and one of their main means of life saving was one of these. (show life ring)

This is called a lifebuoy, sometimes a life ring, or a lifesaver.

The ones we are used to seeing were invented way back in the early 19th century. Life rings like this one were used as an emergency life preservers for situations in which passengers or crew fell overboard, or at the Life-Saving Stations, when anyone ended up in the water and needed rescuing. They were designed to be thrown at a person in the water and had a line attached so rescuers could pull the person overboard back to the boat for recovery without having to jump in.

Mary certainly needed her life saved, but not by the Jesus she had known on earth. His time was done, and it was time for him to return to where he came from and be fully God outside of his earthly body of 33 years.

Back at the wave pool, the lifeguards there didn't wait in the water for someone to get in trouble, did they? What do they do?

They are outside of the water, watching and waiting, and then jumping in to save a life.

They needed to be outside the waves of water to save the people from something. I watched a show on water rescues, no not Baywatch 😊, and the true rescuers talked about the one thing that scares them the most. Do you know what scares them the most?

The person drowning in the water

who is at the end of their rational thinking.
When they go out to rescue them,
they don't know what to expect.
They are desperate and ready to cling to anything they can,
including the one trying to rescue them.
They don't mean to do it,
but they're scared and helpless.
And so, they have to be very careful, and sometimes
they have to rescue them with outside means,
like a lifesaver, so they don't drown.

Several weeks ago, I talked about our trip last summer to Seneca Falls NY.

And that Seneca Falls is the actual town
that was the model for Bedford Falls in It's a Wonderful Life.
And in the middle of Seneca Falls,
there is a green metal truss bridge,
which is exactly duplicated for the movie.
You might remember the scene in the movie
where George (Jimmy Stewart) is about to jump
into the icy river below to end his life
when Clarence, Angel, 2nd class, falls in first,
forcing George to decide to save him.
Which he does, and the story really begins.

But did you know that it is based
on a real incident in Seneca Falls?
On April 12, 1917, Antonio Varacalli,
a Barge Canal worker was walking near the bridge
when he heard someone scream.
He ran to the canal bank and saw a
young woman struggling in the water.
Without hesitation, he jumped into the canal
to save the young woman,
although he could not swim.
He managed to get the girl to the canal bank
before he sank into the water and drowned.

On the bridge is a plaque remembering his sacrifice,
and several years ago, the town brought this woman,
Ruth Dunham, who was saved, supposedly
she was trying to take her own life,

and all her descendants together with the family of Antonio, who lived in Italy.
And they were able to tell them
thank you for giving them life, which his sacrifice did.
And when you walk on the bridge,
there are thousands of small bells
tied to it by people who believe the movie saved their lives.
I would be one of those too,
but that is a story for another day.

Another young woman who needed someone
to save her when she couldn't save herself.
Antonio was Ruth's lifesaver. And Jesus was Mary's lifesaver.
And Jesus is my lifesaver.
And yours and yours. All of us.

Many of us are familiar with another kind of lifesaver

that actually looks just like this one, but smaller.
Invented in 1912 by Cleveland chocolate maker Clarence Crane,
Life Savers were designed as a "summer candy"
that wouldn't melt like chocolate and
were intentionally shaped to resemble,
you guessed it, life preservers.
It was a summer marketing masterpiece.
Pep-O-mint. Wint-O-Mint. Spear-O-mint.
We all have our favorites.

Now there have been urban legends that Life Savers
were invented because kids were choking on hard candy,
so they put a hole in the middle so they could breathe.
It's not true, but a nice story.

But this morning I do want you to see this as truly a LifeSaver.

That this little original Pep-O-Mint lifesaver

will remind us that Jesus is our Lifesaver.
That he came into this world to give us
life and give it abundantly.
That his transforming voice is calling out
our names, saving us, and changing us.

That like the stone that was rolled away from the tomb,
that if we believe, Jesus comes in to save us

from something that we can't save ourselves from.
His death on the cross and resurrection
give all believers not only a new life
here but an eternal life with God.

I hope you will take this LifeSaver and consider

receiving Jesus into your life today or recommitting
your life to the one who saved you
when we couldn't save ourselves.
Don't eat it; keep it close to you, and remember that
He is Risen and that Jesus is your Lifesaver.
Now you can cling to him, and he is calling
your name to let him into your life.

There is one thing about a lifesaver we have to remember...
A lifesaver won't save us if we don't reach out for it.
Will you let Jesus transforming voice in?