The Grace of Transformation

## A Savior of Grace

## By Steve Viars

**Bible Text:** John 20:1-18

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### Faith Church

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Here's an important question to ask 2 weeks before Easter Sunday, here it is: was the dress white and gold? Was the dress blue and black, huh? Unless you've been visiting another planet, you have undoubtedly heard about what some have labeled as dress gate which was an amazing internet sensation the last week of February. It all started with a mother-in-law, did you know that? I'm just going to leave that alone. I have the greatest mother-in-law in all the world. I'm not going to go for the joke on that one but the truth of the matter is, it did start with a mother-in-law. Here's what happened. A couple, Grace and Keir Johnston from Scotland, they were making the final plans for their wedding when Grace's mom sent her a picture of the dress she intended to wear and this young couple had an argument about the actual color of the dress. So they did what oftentimes young people would do anymore to settle an argument, they posted the thing on Facebook. They put the picture out there and they asked all their friends.

Well, all of their friends also disagreed as well. What made it go viral was that one of Johnston's friends is a woman named Caitlin McNeil who sings in a Scottish folk band that was actually scheduled to play at that wedding. Well, the day of the wedding, they got there and they saw Grace's mom wearing the dress that was obviously blue and black but they got into a discussion behind the scenes about, "Well, why is it that the picture looks white and gold to so many of us?" And they were so entrenched in that argument they almost missed their cute to come and play during the wedding ceremony. Caitlin's the one who reposted the image on her blog on February 26. That's when the argument just went viral. In the first week, 10 million tweets mentioned this dress. Scientists weighed in. Sociologists. Celebrities. Everybody seemed to have an opinion. The preaches are talking about it now, for crying out loud.

Some people believe the dress actually changes colors on its own. That was one of the theories going around. One newspaper described this story as "The drama that divided a planet." One guy, he figured, "Well, I'm going to go to the person in my life who certainly would understand color, my tattoo artist." So he went to his tattoo guy and showed him a picture. The tattoo guy said, "Oh, it's clearly black and blue." So you know what the guy did next? He got a tattoo of the dress. Yeah, I don't even want to know where but he has a tattoo now of the dress with #blueandblack.

Ben Fisher of the New York Business Journal wrote a subsequent article about the business aspect of this phenomena. BuzzFeed actually assigned 2 teams to write additional articles about this dress just to generate ad revenue. When it was all said and done if you can believe their stats, their original article had received 37 million hits. Is it white or gold or is it black or blue?

One of the more creative uses of the story I thought was a group that attached the image to their concern for domestic violence. What a powerful image that was. "Why is it so hard to see black and blue?"

Well, I don't know what you thought when you first saw it. I thought it was white and gold and before you fuss at me, 68% according to BuzzFeed, of their users thought it was white and gold as well. Well, one of the lessons here is this: it's possible for you to interpret an event through your particular way of thinking and to be absolutely convinced that you are seeing things correctly when it turns out the truth is dramatically different, huh? You just had it wrong. You just had it wrong. That principle figures quite prominently into Easter morning.

With that in mind, I want to invite you now to open your Bible to John 19. The Gospel of John, chapter 19. If you don't have a Bible with you, just pull out the one from under the chair in front of you and turn to the back section, to the New Testament, to page 89. That will bring you to John 19 this morning.

Our theme as a church family this year is "Finding Grace," taken from what is just becoming a marvelous passage for so many of us. We're finding opportunities to think about this text practically every week, for sure, where the writers of Hebrews said, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to," what? "To the throne of grace." What a great phrase. Throne, there is authority, "throne of grace so that we may receive mercy." Did you need any of that this week? "So that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need."

During Easter season, we're focusing on the Gospel of John. I love this book, don't you? And thinking about our Savior of grace. John actually introduced Jesus at the beginning of this book by saying this in John 1:14, "And the Word," speaking of Christ, "became flesh, and dwelt among us," you see, his presence is all we need, huh? "And dwelt among us and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of," what? Aren’t you glad for a Savior like that? That's what got me out of bed this morning, how about you? To worship and celebrate a Savior of grace, "full of grace and truth." Then he went on to say, "For of His fullness we have all received, and," don't you love this? "Grace on top of grace, on top of grace."

Well, this morning we're going to look at a passage of Scripture where everybody involved thought the dress was white and gold. They just did. They were sure that the way they were interpreting these events was correct but the dress was blue and black. The truth was dramatically different than what they thought. Here's why that's important: you and I find ourselves in situations where we really believe our perspective is right. Some of us just a tad bit stubborn, huh? Could I get a little uh-huh on that? Maybe even that I would hear from Faith West right now? Feel free to answer for the person next to you. This passage helps us see how our Savior of grace gently but definitely takes us from where we are to where he wants us to be, huh?

John 19, beginning in verse 38. This is now after Christ has died on the cross, "After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews," well, that's too bad, "asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. Nicodemus," you remember him, right, from John 3? "Who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes," listen to this, "about a hundred pounds weight." Imagine what that would be worth. "So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there." Now, we're going to study this next section in John 20 and I want to encourage you to follow very carefully on the chronology of all of this because understanding the details helps us get to the point.

John 20, verse 1, "Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark," that's an important detail, "and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved," who was that? That was John, the writer of this book, "and said to them, 'They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.'" Well, that's not exactly what had happened, Mary, but that's what she thought. "So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. The two were running together," picture this, "and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; and stooping and looking in, he," now hear this, "he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself." I thought Mary said grave robbers had done this? "So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and," what? Key verse, "and believed. For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again to their own homes. But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them," and by the way, I wonder why they asked her that? "She said to them, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.'" So we're still on that narrative. "When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus asked the same question, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' Supposing Him to be the," what? That's called getting it wrong. "Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to Him, 'Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'" One word. The dress just went from being white and gold to being blue and black. Do you see that? In one word. "She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I ascend"'" now, listen to this, "I ascend to My Father and," in spite of your unbelief, "your Father, and My God and your God." There is some grace. "Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord,' and that He had said these things to her."

We're talking this morning about the grace of transformation. That's what happened in the hearts and lives of each character in this text, do you realize that? Mary Magdalene thought one thing and she experienced the grace of transformation. Peter, John thought one thing, the dress is white and gold. They experienced the grace of transformation. I'd like us to think about 3 ways from this passage that Jesus brings followers to a point of repentance. Do you realize, it is possible that you might be here this morning and heading down a particular road having a particular perspective, being convinced that you're right and, friend, God wants you to turn around. That may be the situation in which you find yourself this morning. Well, how does he do that? How does he do that? What does transforming grace look like? What does transforming grace feel like? Three ways Jesus brought his followers to a point of repentance.

Well, they were transformed by unsettling circumstances. Now, we're going to be focusing on what we read here in the Gospel of John but I really want to encourage you and if you've been around our church before you know around Easter I often say this, I would encourage you to study the events surrounding the passion week through all 4 of the Gospels and there's actually a book that is designed to help you do that. It's called "The Harmony of the Gospels" where it lays right next to one another all 4 of the Gospels' retelling of these events so you can read about them in chronological order. By the way, if you have a study Bible, you probably have a harmony of the Gospels in your study Bible or certainly you could find one online if you would like to do it like that. But I really believe, I've always found it to be helpful around Easter just to read through a harmony of the Gospels and see these events chronologically and what each Gospel writer was led to record for us.

But we're in John 20, from John's perspective, he begins the day by talking about Mary's shock. Now, one of the challenges is there are several different characters in Scripture named Mary, did you know that? In fact, you may remember, folks, just last Sunday when we were talking about the cross, we mentioned John 19:25, "But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother," what was her name? Mary, "and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." So all 3 women who were standing at the foot of the cross at least mentioned in that text, were named Mary.

Well, this one here is clearly identified in John 20 as Mary Magdalene but there's really not a lot in the Bible about her. Some people liken her to or believe that she is the prostitute of Luke 7. There is no real proof of that but what we do know is very powerful. Let's go back to the beginning of the story for just a minute. This is Luke 8, "Soon afterwards, Jesus began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene," there she is, "Mary who was called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means." Now, I realize that statement makes us want to ask about 100 questions, huh? But all we know for sure is that her life had been dramatically changed through Christ's ministry, so much so that she is now traveling around with the disciples and another group of people who were listening to his teaching, who were observing his miracles. Then later we know that even when many others deserted Christ during his trials and crucifixion, Mary Magdalene stayed there. She was one of the ones who was there at the foot of the cross. She watched him die.

So now, back to our text on Sunday. The Scripture says, "on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb." Now, in reconciling this with the other Gospels, here's what we think happened: it appears that Mary actually started on this journey with another group of women and then at some point she hurried to the tomb ahead of them so she separated herself at some point from them. She got there ahead of time before the sun came up and the passage is clear then, she saw that the large stone that should have been in front of the tomb was rolled away. So in her mind, time to make a determination, trying to interpret the facts, in her mind the only logical explanation was that someone had come and taken the body. So she immediately does what? She doesn't go back and meet the other women that she had started with. She goes to tell Peter and John. In the intervening time, by the way, the sun comes up obviously and we have some of the initial conversations recorded in the other Gospels with the remaining women and an angel they meet when they eventually get to the tomb. Just keep that in mind. That's going to become important.

But John is focusing on how shocked and unsettled Mary Magdalene would have been by this news. Then he tells us about this foot race. Peter and John, they too knew that Christ had died. They probably also know the information that I read at the end of chapter 19, that Christ's body had been subsequently given to Joseph of Arimathea. They probably know that Nicodemus, the same man in John 3 who had apparently become a follower of Christ, and this is important, had prepared Jesus' body for burial with a significant amount of very costly ointment. Peter and John probably also were aware of what we read in Matthew 27, don't forget this detail: that at the request of the chief priests and the Pharisees, Pilate posted whom? Soldiers to secure the tomb and guard it because of Christ's repeated prophecy that if they killed him, in 3 days he would rise from the dead. So the point is: what Mary is reporting, remember she came, she sees the stone, she goes and talks to Peter and John. It doesn't make any sense what she is reporting. In their mind, the dress is white and gold. Jesus died. How in the world could his body have been stolen? So they take off for the tomb. It's interesting, by the way that John thought it was important for us to know that he beat Peter in the race. Only a guy would have inserted that little detail. "Oh, by the way, I whooped him."

What happens next? "Stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in." Now, that details matters a lot. Do you realize every word in the Bible is there for a reason? That detail matters a lot because it seriously undermines "the robbers stole the body" theory. That may not be immediately apparent to us but grave robbers would have never left the cloths. You understand, in that culture cloth was worth a lot. How do we know that? It's not, "Well, the preacher said that." No, we know that from the previous chapter we just studied last week. What was it that the soldiers at the foot of the cross did? They actually divided the clothes of Jesus and then when it came down to the tunic that had no seams, how did they determine who was going to get that? They are actually gambling in order to decide. Those soldiers, I'm talking about the soldiers at the cross now, were very, very concerned about getting some more cloth. The facts are not adding up. In fact, if anything, if there were grave robbers involved in this, they would have taken the cloths and the ointment, the expense of ointment and left the body. What in the world are you going to do with a body anyway? Sell it to IU Med School? It's not making sense.

Then Peter barrels into the tomb. You see, John just looked in. You can imagine Peter, he's probably huffing and puffing. He finally gets there and he pushes John aside and bam, right inside. The guy has absolutely no fear. If you ever get in an alley fight, you want Peter with you, huh? What are you doing in an alley fight anyway? But anyway, we read in the next text, "So Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but," uh-oh, the dress is going from white to gold to blue and black, do you know that? "Not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself." Do you see what's happening? Every one of these details is laden with grace. They woke up this morning being absolutely wrong about the color of the dress, absolutely wrong about what is actually occurring and the Lord is giving them enough evidence, enough facts to help them repent, to help them carefully reevaluate what's happening. There is no way grave robbers would have left the ointment saturated cloths and even if they did, they certainly wouldn't have taken the time to separate the facecloth and fold it up. Have you ever known a man to voluntarily fold clothes? Can I get a witness on that? By the way, none of this addresses how the robbers would have gotten past the soldiers. By the way, where in the world are the soldiers at this point in the story?

Actually, you're giving me a lot of details. Here is the point of this and John makes clear we know, it's John 20:8, "So the other disciple," himself, John, "who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and," he what? "Believed." Here's the point: God sovereignly orchestrated the details to bring them to a point of repentance and belief. Do you realize that? That's the point of this text. Repentance means change your mind about something. Turn around and follow a different path. Admit that the dress you sincerely thought was white and gold is really blue and black. You see, Jesus had told them repeatedly that he would be raised from the dead after he was crucified, right? In fact, one of many texts I could go to demonstrate that principle, Matthew 16, this is when Jesus explains to Peter that he's going to build a church. Do you remember this? "From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." Why would that have been announced right after he explained that he was going to build his church? Because it's impossible for us to experience the presence of God. What were we singing about earlier? "Your presence is all I need." Listen, God is holy. You believe that don't you? And you and I fall way short. Could I get an ah-ha on that? And it's impossible for us to have a relationship with him and it's impossible for a church, a called out group of people to be built unless somebody is willing to die for our sin. That's the point of the cross, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ and to prove that the price he paid on the cross was accepted by the Father God marvelously and miraculously did what? Raised him from the dead. Jesus nailed it. He did exactly what he said he was going to do and Peter didn't even like that then. You remember, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, you're a stumblingblock to me. You need to believe this for you're not setting your mind on God's interests but man's."

So Jesus had told them repeatedly that he was going to die on their behalf but then 3 days later, he was going to rise from the dead. They also heard him preach about that, by the way, to the consternation of the crowd often. Do you remember this? And I’m just giving you examples for sake of time. There are many of them in Scripture. This is John 2:18, "The Jews then said to Him, 'What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'" Then John explains, "The Jews then said, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking of the temple of His body." And Scripture says at least John, we're actually not sure about Peter, we're going to talk some more about him 2 weeks from now in one of my favorite passages in all the Bible, the end of the Gospel of John. But right now for sure, John concluded that, "What the 3 of us thought about this situation is incorrect. Our Savior is alive and that changes everything."

That's why John wrote this down in his Gospel. You say, "How do you know that?" Because he explains it. At the end of the chapter he says, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe," there it is, so that you may repent, so that you may change your mind, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." They are eyewitnesses.

I've been in Mississippi the last couple of days. I'll tell you, my humanly speaking track record for flying at bad times is really good right now. I flew to Seattle a couple of weeks ago the day after that plane had slid off the runway in New York City. That will get you kind of excited about getting on an airplane. Then I flew the other morning to Mississippi. That was the day somebody hacked up a TSA agent with a machete in New Orleans and I'm flying in that direction. This is a terrible story but I was about 40 miles from where that same day they had found an African American man who had been hung. We don't know for sure. We don't know for sure. The investigation is ongoing. Was that a suicide or was that a murder? But I'll tell you this about that event: you talk about people in Mississippi being on eggshells right now. You know what's desperately needed in that event? Sure, they're going to do all the forensic work but if one eyewitness came forward, a credible eyewitness who could say, "Here's what happened," or better yet, a group of credible eyewitnesses who could say, "Here's what happened." We need that desperately.

That's what you have in the Gospel of John and I realize you might say, "Oh, I don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I don't believe the tomb was empty." Hey, you've got 3 eyewitnesses, my friend, and they all believed a particular thing and after they were confronted with the facts, they repented. They changed their mind and they chose to believe and John says, "The reason I wrote this down in a book," what did he get for that? Do you think Peter got anything for believing in the resurrection? Do you think John got anything for believing in the resurrection? I'm talking about in terms of any kind of worldly praise or any kind of material benefit? They wrote it down so that people like you and me would believe. You see, whatever path you've been on, whatever color you've assigned to the dress, God often brings us to a place where the facts simply don't correspond to what you thought was true and then, do you know what happens? Wise people repent. I know it's hard for us as Americans to admit that what we thought was the case is wrong. Wise people repent. Wise people believe and I would suggest that God often does this exact same thing today meaning to put ourselves and our loved ones and our friends in enough unsettling circumstances, just like Mary Magdalene was. You see, these details are all there for a reason. Just like Peter was. Just like John was. Enough unsettling circumstances that we have reason if we're honest to question the validity of our beliefs and to consider repenting if we need to.

This week we had the funeral for one of our members, Dan R. Dan died of cancer at the age of 63. I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty young to me. The age of 63. Here's what Dan said about his illness, "Cancer saved my soul." That's exactly what Dan said about his illness, "Cancer saved my soul." In other words, his testimony, I'm not saying this about him, I'm telling you what he believed. His testimony was he was going through life thinking about himself, thinking about God in a particular way and then he received what was clearly the most unsettling diagnosis that any one of us could imagine and it forced him to reevaluate his relationship with Christ and repent. Later he had the opportunity to lead his own brother to the Lord who was subsequently baptized as an outward profession of his faith in Christ.

It's possible and I may be speaking to someone right now and you are in the midst of unsettling circumstances, you may even be mad at the Lord about that, when the truth of the matter is he's trying to bring you to a place of acknowledging that what you've thought about yourself, namely that you could handle life on your own, thank you very much, or what you've thought about God, that you really don't need a Savior, you don't really need the Lord, that entire interpretation fits under the heading of, "I thought the dress was white and gold," and now it's time to do something that is very hard for many of us as Americans, to admit we were wrong. To repent. To turn around.

John said, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." And friend, if you have never had a definite time in your life where you have admitted your need and you've placed your faith and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, I want to invite you to do that. I want to invite you to do that right now.

Well, the camera switches to Mary now who's about to be transformed by tender concern. You see, verse 10 says that Peter and John went back to their homes but, but the story is not over. "Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb." Now, that would have taken some courage right there, huh? Can you imagine? And I wish we had the video of that part. Did she kind of rush in like Peter? I kind of doubt it. I think, for me, I would've been more like John. We don't know for sure but the text is clear about this, "she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?'" You say, "Well, that's kind of mean. That poor woman is sitting there crying and the angels are fussing at her about it." Well, this is where understanding the chronology of these events is so important.

Let's start over just to be sure you get this part of the point. What happened? Mary Magdalene sets off with the other women to go to the tomb. That's how this day began. She goes on ahead of the other women and actually gets to the entrance of the tomb, here is the key point chronologically, before the sun came up and she goes and runs to see Peter and John and tell them what she saw. In the intervening time, the other women get to the tomb, an angel is there and explains, "Jesus is alive. Go tell the others." So those women then go and meet now Peter and John are with Mary Magdalene and those women announce that Jesus is alive. So what should Mary be expecting when she gets to the tomb? Evidence that Christ is alive and an opportunity not to be weeping anymore but to be rejoicing. In fact, Luke explains the point, this is Luke 24, "When Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe." Then perhaps because the angels look at who had just appeared, the resurrected Christ, she turns and Jesus is there and Jesus asks the exact same question, "Woman, why are you weeping? You've already heard the news that I'm alive. You've already heard the news that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. Why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?"

Do you see the next phrase in the text? "Supposing Him to be," what? "The gardener." Do you see the point of all that? Once you get it in your mind that you're right, once you get it in your mind that the dress is gold and white, it is hard to see anything else. And sure, Jesus probably would have looked somewhat different now in his resurrected state than he had the last time she had seen him, let's give her some grace there. But the reason both the angel and Jesus tenderly asked her that question is because she had already heard what the other ladies had reported about the resurrection of Christ but she's committed to her interpretation of the events that she thought the resurrected Christ was the gardener. Call that, "I really had the color of the dress wrong."

And what happens next in this passage is one of my favorite parts in the entire text because we have the Lord's call, it's just one word, "Mary." Don't you love the tenderness of that moment? Do you see the color of the dress transform in an instant? Friend, I'm suggesting that transaction is just dripping with grace. "Mary." And part of what was wonderful was the way she responded. When she repented, when she believed, when she understood this is the resurrected Christ, what did she do next, she started hugging on him and she was not going to let go. Have you ever had a hug like that? "This is getting a little long." That's the power of transforming grace.

One of the things I love about being a pastor is watching persons be transformed by the grace of God who thought one thing about their life, one thing about their circumstances, were committed to that evaluation and then many times seeing that road take them into unsettling circumstances and sometimes even pain and then God calling their name and to see them change in a moment by the transforming grace of God. Last Sunday night I was with Barry and Carla Redding. We were there at the hospital with Barry's mom, Nancy. Nancy and Jay attended this church for many, many years when they were physically able to do so. Nancy received a diagnosis of ovarian cancer, outlived the diagnosis by a long time, by the way, but eventually had to go into a nursing home for she and Jay's health as well. Then she was very near death, obviously, last Sunday night but we had a delightful conversation with Nancy. She was still very alert. She was still able to talk about her hope of heaven. She knew where she was going and she was thankful for the life that God had given her. She was rejoicing. She understood, "I'm on my way to heaven not because of my own merit but because of what Christ has done for me." So it was just a delightful time to see the powerful grace of God at work even the moments before a person was about to be ushered into eternity.

Then, I walked out into the parking lot with Barry and Carla and we were just standing there last Sunday night and, honestly, discussing some of the details of the funeral. I knew I had to be traveling and so we were just trying to get some of that laid out if we possibly could and Carla made a reference that just hit me like a ton of bricks. We were thinking about some chronology and she said, "Oh yeah, that was in 1991, the year of my accident." I hadn't thought about that in a long time. Carla's accident, those of you who have been in our church, you know Barry and Carla's story. They have told it publicly here many times but their story was back in 1991, they were separated. They were headed for divorce because their perspective on their situation was, "This is hopeless. This is hopeless. This relationship is dead." Then Carla came and received biblical counseling here and she reaffirmed her faith in Christ. She changed her perspective on that situation because of transforming grace.

Not long after that, she was in a very serious car accident and I remember the night being in that hospital room and oh my, what an incredible tragedy humanly speaking. Well, God used all of that. Carla was changed and then the accident started working in Barry's heart. In fact, I remember one of the things that Barry said to me early on was, "Man, I don't know what's going on in my wife's life but I like it. She is changing and I want to understand what it means to have the kind of relationship with God that she does." I remember the day that Barry placed his faith and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord and here's what happened in both of their lives: we have a particular perspective about this relationship, "It's over. It's hopeless. It's dead," and then at the appropriate moment, God called their name and God allowed that road to have unsettling circumstances. God allowed that road even to have some pain to put them in the best possible position where they would come to the end of themselves and repent and respond to the call of God upon their life. Now, 24 years later, I'm standing in a parking lot with them knowing that Carla's parents have passed away and her dear hubby was right there at her side for that and now Barry's mama is it going to heaven and there is his sweet bride right at his side for that great trial. Friends, I'm suggesting that's what our powerful God can do. He is a God of transforming grace.

Paul said, "If you will confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved for with the heart a person believes resulting in righteousness and with the mouth he confesses resulting in salvation." That's why we're encouraging you, by the way, to invite all your friends to the Passion Play. I'm so glad for all the work that's been done in the Passion Play but listen, I hope you're not giving up on your friends. You might say, "Well, that person just looks like they've given up on God. They have no interest in spiritual things." Are you kidding? God may be calling their name and they may be in a situation where they're just getting ready to turn around. Don't you want to be part of that story? I want to encourage you to invite your friends to Easter Sunday where we're going to celebrate the resurrection together. Maybe that's the day that God may call the name of one of your friends and one of your friends is finally willing to hear that. We're doing an outreach series after Easter for that exact same reason because our God is a God of transforming grace and we have people all around us who believe that the dress is white and gold and God stands ready to call their name and allow them to repent and come back to himself.

Well, how does the story end? I bet because Peter and John had it wrong, I bet because Mary Magdalene had it wrong, they had to sit at the back of the bus. Is that the way transforming grace works? No, think about how this goes: "Jesus said to her, 'Stop clinging to Me,'" I have a message for you to send, in other words, "go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and,'" who? "And your Father," you're part of the family, "and My God and your God." "Because of my death on the cross and my resurrection from the grave, my Father is your Father and my God is your God."

I mentioned, I just spent the last couple of days in Mississippi. I had a dear elderly Southern woman come and tell me a story during one of the breaks. I wish I had it on video. It's amazing how frequently I have a conversation like that. It's like, "Do you mind if I video this?" Here's what she told me, she said: "Steve, I just want to tell you about my brother. My brother and I grew up and he had no interest in the things of God, didn't want to hear about the Gospel, didn't want to hear about repentance. He decided that he was going to go his own way and he eventually got involved in alcohol. He thought he was going to find his joy there, find his satisfaction there. He got addicted to alcohol, ruined his life. I tried to talk to him about repentance," she said. "I tried to talk to him about the Gospel. He just had no interest so I wanted to respect it and I didn't force it on him. I talked to him from time to time but didn't force it. Then eventually he got a disease of the liver and then cancer and," she said, "I went to visit my brother about 3 weeks before he died and I walked into the room and he said to me, 'Sis, I got it.'" She said, "What do you mean, you've got it?" He said, "I saw a sign by the side of the road that said, 'The law doesn't allow u-turns but God does,' so I decided to place my faith and trust in Christ. I've become a Christian." And she told me, she said, "Do you know what? To him I was just rejoicing so much that he became a Christian no question about that but privately, just with me, I thought, 'Why in the world didn't he will listen to me? For all these years I've been talking to him about all this complicated theology. I've been trying to explain repentance to him in a thousand different ways and he gets the message from some goofy sign on the side of the road.'"

There's the lesson. You never know how and when God's going to be calling somebody's name and you never know when that person may finally be willing to answer. She told me this, she said, "I was with my brother right there before he died and I'm not even sure if he knew I was in the room at the time. He was kind of mumbling, in and out of consciousness. But I heard him say these words, 'Thank you, Jesus, for what you have done for me.'" And she said, "It was incredible to hear my brother say that. Just moments before he died," you see, what is that? Somebody went from believing his whole life the dress was white and gold to repenting and believing in the truth. "Thank you, Jesus, for what you have done for me."

If you are here this morning and you've never placed your faith and trust in Christ, friends, you've got eyewitness accounts you need to deal with. This isn't just some preacher pontificating, you have eyewitness accounts and maybe God is calling your name and I would encourage you now while you have the opportunity to do so to repent and believe.

Christian friend, repentance doesn't end when we trust Christ, does it? Boy, some of us are just stubborn, aren't we? We're going to fight with some person, we've got something going on and we are just digging into our perspective even though God's word would say something dramatically different. I want to call upon us to continue to look for the transforming grace of God and when we need to repent, let's do it quickly.

Would you stand together for prayer?

*Father in heaven, thank you, Lord, for orchestrating these events the way you did. Lord, I pray that you would help us to proceed on the path toward you in part by being people who quickly repent. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.*