

Mary Magdelene

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[0 : 00] Now, before we turn to God's word, let's have a quick word of prayer. It seems like a good idea to me. Father, thank you. Your word is amazing.

We thank you that you have revealed yourself to us through the pages of Scripture. And we thank you that your word is true and reliable and complete. We have everything we need.

I pray that you would lead us and guide us as we explore what you have to say to us tonight. Please grant us wisdom, insight and understanding. I pray that you would forgive the foolishness of some of the things I might say.

I pray that you would guide me and direct me. And I pray you would grant everybody here willing ears to listen, not to me, but to you. Because you are present and active and your word is an amazing thing.

So please bless us with your spirit. Lead us, guide us. May you be present and may you be glorified. In Jesus' name, amen. Okay.

[1 : 09] Well, we're going to look tonight at Mary Magdalene. And it's, I think, one in a series of sort of analysis or discussions of particular individuals in Scripture.

Now, I was speaking to someone yesterday and said, what do you know about Mary Magdalene? And she said, not very much. The problem being there isn't actually an awful lot said about her in the Bible.

But what is said is very important. So let me give you a quick summary of what Scripture says about Mary. And then we'll try and discern what that has to say to us tonight.

It's interesting. Mary is mentioned in all the Gospels. But she's mentioned quite briefly. And she doesn't, she first of all features in Luke 8, where she's mentioned as a lady who had seven demons and Jesus cast them out of her.

So she's been miraculously transformed from like the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. So that's our introduction to Mary. We then come across her as one of a group of women who, as Jesus is travelling around Galilee, and he's going through the cities and the villages, preaching the good news and healing people, there's a group of women who get behind him in the disciples and basically look after their needs as this sort of group goes from city to city and village to village.

[2 : 33] So Mary's mentioned as one of those and mentioned as a lady of some means. So she has some wealth available to her to support the Gospel. Next time we come across Mary, she's in Jerusalem.

So the picture has moved from Galilee to Jesus and his disciples, his followers have gone up to Jerusalem. And Mary is present at the cross. All the disciples at this point have fled, the men have done a runner, and the women, Mary, the mother of Jesus and two of the others, are there present at the site of crucifixion.

And they see Jesus die. We then hear that Mary also sees Jesus buried, where he was laid. So they're quite clear that Mary's some kind of witness.

And then finally we have this chapter that is our focus, if you like, or kind of brings it all together for us, that Mary then is very present and an active part in the story of the resurrection.

She's the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And then she disappears from the scene. We don't hear anything about Mary again. So that's a basic brief introduction.

[3 : 43] But I guess I make a couple of points, first of all. It is impossible, it's simply impossible to understand any character in the Bible, except by reference to Jesus Christ.

So you'll see this time and time again that characters are only introduced and given a voice or given a story to the degree that they tie into the story of Jesus.

Jesus is the main story, the main event, which is what you'd expect because the Gospel writers, in primary purpose, is to tell you about Jesus. Everyone else is like support cast to that primary task, that primary challenge.

So everything we'll talk about tonight really is not looking at Mary madly in isolation. That would just be complete foolishness. It wouldn't make sense. It's looking at Mary in relation to Jesus.

Now I would argue tonight that the same is true for all of us. That our story, you and I, everyone here individually and collectively, our story does not make sense except in relation to Jesus Christ.

[4 : 53] It's very, very difficult to make sense, to create a narrative around your life if Jesus is absent. So with that as a backdrop, let's sort of go into Mary.

And I've tried to divide it up into three passages of life, if you like. The past, the present and the future. We'll see what works. So first of all, let's think about the past.

And it was first introduced to Mary as a woman who had seven demons, which sounds quite unpleasant. Now this is in the context of Jesus proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

Now what Jesus did was he got up in the synagogue and said, the kingdom is here. And he then went around Galilee demonstrating that the kingdom is here. Now how did he do that?

Two, three very simple things. He healed people. He cast out demons and he raised the dead. And he also showed miraculous power over nature by calming the wind, the storms, by providing food.

[6 : 00] So he did everything that you would associate with someone who has divine status, with someone who has authority over the physical world and over the spiritual world and someone who has come to destroy death.

So that's the context in which we hear about Mary. And Mary is one of these individuals who he has healed, who he has, these seven demons have been cast out for, and they don't know anything else about the event, which is quite frustrating.

It's interesting that the Gospel writers here are quite reticent. Now why is that? It's always interesting when the Gospel writers don't say things, when they exclude information that you or I would be quite interested in.

When I was a kid, I was only allowed to read Good Literature on a Sunday. You might be familiar with that sort of approach. So I was only allowed to read Edifying Works, which was a bit frustrating as a child because you tended to find them quite boring, to be honest.

But the one I did like was this book called Run Baby Run. You may remember this, I don't know, in the 70s. Some New York gang member, Nicky Cruz, and the bit I liked, there was the first sort of third in the book which told me about his life before he was converted, and he's got up to all sorts of things he shouldn't have got up to, really, but I find that quite exciting.

[7 : 18] So we got converted as far as I was concerned, this story went downhill quite rapidly. And we're a bit like that, we like these exciting narratives, don't we? We want all the dangerous stuff, the dodgy stuff, but we don't get any of that with Mary, which is fascinating.

Now why is that? What's going on here? If you look at some of the other sort of main characters in the New Testament, the 12 apostles, Jesus' disciples, we don't know anything really at all to speak of about their life before they became apostles.

It's interesting why is that? What's going on? Paul's perhaps an exception. Paul tells us a lot about his life, and we're told a lot about his life, you know, he was a Pharisee and all the rest of it, but then after he tells you all about his life and Philipians says, by the way, that was all rubbish.

That was a waste of time, let's forget about it. He has no value whatsoever. He wants to cast it as far away from him as possible.

I think the key to thinking about all this is a little verse in Corinthians, if I can find it.

[8 : 36] Yes, I can, that's good. Second Corinthians 5 verse 16. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. There may be many reasons why the story of Mary before is not included in the Bible, but it seems to me one of the primary reasons is that the Gospel writers have no interest in you remembering Mary Magdalene as this sinful woman and her kind of terrible story beforehand.

What's fascinating is that the church through the ages has tried to construct a narrative, a story of Mary as a sinful woman. So the medieval church associated Mary with being a prostitute, and all sorts of reasons why they thought she was, is because Magdalene was supposed to be a terrible place, and she sounded like the verb for putting curls in your hair, and that was the sort of thing that women of a certain repute did.

It's all very, very flaky. So it's kind of fascinating, and in medieval times, if you see pictures of Mary Magdalene, she's crying.

Always she's crying with red eyes because she was perceived as this woman who had been a terrible, terrible sinner, and although she'd been saved and was now part of the church, she was never allowed to forget that sin, never allowed to put it behind her.

[10 : 13] She was constantly weeping and weeping and wailing for this time past. Now that is not the Gospel. That is not the Gospel. The Gospel is that Christ came and died for your sins so that you and your God who saved you can forget them.

And we're told that God forgets your sins. So we have this peculiar situation where, if you like, the world, the flesh, the devil, keep on trying to force us back into that story that I am of the past.

And again, that is not the Gospel. So the world is always wanting to remember you for your faults and your weaknesses, your mistakes, the things you've done wrong.

Read any obituary. That's the way the world wants to remind you. Your own heart quite often wants to remind you, wants to go back to those days. The devil certainly wants to pull you back to that all the time.

The devil does not want you believing that you are saved by grace, believing that you've been set free to serve the Lord in joy in the knowledge that your sins have been forgiven.

[11 : 25] The devil wants you to live in that dark place where you're continually weeping for things that have happened in the past and they're in the past. The Gospel tells you that you are not your past.

And I may be building too much out of lack of information here, but I think you do see it time and time again in the New Testament that what happened before is irrelevant. The New Testament writers are interested in the lives of people after they come to Jesus, interested in new life.

So let's live that out. I think even in the church, too often we drag up people's pasts and allow that to define what we think of them.

The past is the past. You are not your past. I was chatting to one of my nieces yesterday who was in China for a year and she was talking about this with regard to a great work with ex prostitutes, which is fantastic, a Christian work which helps women who have been prostitutes and helps them to come out of that and give them work, and that's marvellous.

But the problem with that, the weakness of it, is that they're always known as women who were prostitutes. They never get away from that. That cannot be the Gospel. So that's the first stage in Mary's life and we know very little about it and we don't need to know about it.

[12 : 46] We need to know the past. We only need to know that she had seven demons cast out of her. That's an incredible, amazing thing we know very little about that was the past. Let's move on to the next stage, which I've kind of termed the present.

It's a bit of a poetic license, but hopefully you'll see where I'm going. So Mary's not her past. What about her present?

The present I'm really thinking about in terms of from her being saved by the demons cast out of her, her joining the group of believers who follow Jesus around the country and supporting.

There's this path of ascent. They're going the right way. They're heading up Jerusalem and there's a great feeling amongst a lot of the disciples and a lot of the followers of Jesus that Jesus is the Messiah.

He's going to be made King. These are wonderful, exciting times. He's demonstrated to everybody that he has power over nature. He has power over creation. He has power over demons. He has power over death itself.

[13 : 48] Why wouldn't you be excited instead of which really the next time we find Mary, she's at the cross and she's watching her savior, the man who saved her on a cross dying.

The next time we see her or hear about her, she's watching him being buried. She saw where he was laid. She saw the stone being rolled over.

And the next time we find her, she's weeping by an open grave. Weeping by an open grave.

So what's going on? There's two or three things I think we need to focus on. The first is she's suffering. Mary is suffering.

She's in a place where everything that she's put her hope in has been destroyed. She's bet the bank, so to speak, on Jesus being the Messiah.

[14 : 54] And her Jesus, her savior, has been crucified and is now in a grave. And the man who gave life, meaning, purpose and narrative to her life is gone. He's absent.

So she's suffering. Suffering deeply. The New Testament makes it very, very clear that followers of Jesus will suffer.

Suffering is a normal state of affairs. Now suffering is a normal state of affairs for everybody. You can't, you don't really get out scot-free in life.

For Christians, for certain Christians, suffering seems to be more extreme that they suffer because of their faith. And we're very fortunate for a wheel of, we don't, to all intents and purposes, suffer for our faith. They have this deep, deep suffering and we all need a story and understanding of life that makes sense of not just the good times but also makes sense of suffering.

Those times in life where things have not worked out the way they were supposed to be. Where we have a God who appears to have deserted us.

[16:11] To all intents and purposes as Mary weeps by the tomb, God appears to be absent. And all of us of any age or maybe even not of any age, I don't know.

But at points in our life we will go through times when God appears to be absent when the picture doesn't stack up. When the things that we thought would happen don't happen.

The pieces to our lives that we expected to be there are not there. And it can range from a, oh my goodness I didn't get that job, to standing beside an open grave with someone you've lost.

It's gone. You didn't expect that to happen. It can be an illness that you had no idea was around the corner. There are any number of events in your life where God will just appear to have let you down to all intents and purposes.

So it's important to have a theology that can deal with that. Because if your theology, if your understanding of God is that he's there to give you a good time, so to speak, or to get you through life with a minimum of hassle, and it's all joy and it's all peace and it's all hallelujah, then your understanding of God is limited and your understanding of God is not going to help you.

[17:32] In fact it's dangerous because when this stuff happens you're left with nothing to hang your hat on. Now, the truth of the matter is if you don't believe in God, we'll stop, then it's all just random anyway.

It really doesn't matter. I mean Richard Dawkins is very honest about this in his better parts. It's just his universe is full of suffering and it's totally random. Every single day and there's no rhyme or reason or meaning to it, it just is.

So I think that's a very spiritually or intellectually bankrupt way to live. I don't think you can live true to that.

But how do we deal with it? What are our thoughts from the Bible about how to make sense of this type of situation where you are weeping and the weeping doesn't go away?

Well, the Old Testament's pretty helpful. We think of the book of Job, for example, is helpful to a degree because what it does do is say, when this happens, when this happens, your job and my job is to wait patiently and to trust.

[18:50] But God and the Old Testament are at least in the book of Job, still very mysterious and very distant and he has his ways and we can see what's going on as we read, but Job can't until right at the end.

Now, we're very fortunate because we have the New Testament also and the New Testament gives us a fundamentally different picture because we don't just have a God who is distant, we have a God who is present and revealed and disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ.

So that doesn't give you all the answers to suffering. I guess I'd make another point, any theology that tries to give you all the answers is dangerous because you can't have all the answers in this side of eternity, but you can say a couple of things.

First is, we may not know why we're suffering at any given point in time. We may not know why the story of our life has not worked out the way we expected it. We may not know why we have terrible disappointments or we have illness or loss or bereavement or whatever else.

We may not know why, but we can say this is not because there is a God in the universe who does not care. You have to rule that out if you believe scripture. You have to.

[20 : 11] In particular with regard to death, one of the great stories in the Bible is Lazarus, you know, they're raising a Lazarus and it's in John chapter 11, I think. Verse 38 is a very interesting verse and I've got a bit of reform the gold dust here, okay?

If you're over, Andy will know what I'm talking about here. This is a bit of analysis that pulls in Tim Keller, B.B. Warfield and John Calvin.

How good is that? And it's also quite good, so the point is death is not the last word. And verse 38, John chapter 11, when Jesus goes to see the grave of Lazarus and Mary and Martha's sisters are weeping, Jesus weeps also, so we know we have a God who weeps.

We also have a God in verse 38 is deeply moved. Now that's interesting, is that the right translation? Warfield quotes Calvin to say, that's not the right translation, there's something else going on here.

Let me just read this. Verse 38 is commonly translated as deeply moved or groaned. Warfield says, what John tells us in point of fact is that Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state not of uncontrollable grief, but of irrepressible anger.

[21 : 41] The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death, its unnatural mess, its violent tyranny, as Calvin phrases it.

In Mary's grief he contemplates the general misery of the whole human race and burns with rage against the oppressor of men. It is death which is the object of his wrath and behind death him who has the power of death and whom he has come into the world to destroy.

Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but this is incidental. His soul is held by rage and he advances to the tomb in Calvin's words again as a champion who prepares for conflict.

Now I like that, I really like that. I think that's very, very powerful that we have a saviour who walked the earth and he is enraged at death.

Death is unacceptable and he has come to destroy death. And in fact he has destroyed death, the Bible tells us that he has destroyed death through his death.

[22 : 55] So the amazing thing is he is a champion who prepares for the conflict, but the way he goes into the conflict is to disarm himself and surrender himself to death and be his death we have life.

So that's the saviour that we have disclosed to us. So again as we think of suffering and accept that you and I will suffer, we will. We know that although we can't explain all of why we suffer, we do know that it cannot be because God doesn't care.

Anne Voskamp, I was a lady who I think she lost her sister at the age of two years old in a senseless accident and she spent years trying to figure out what in the world is going on here.

You know, could make no sense of why God would allow such a terrible thing to happen. Eventually she comes to this conclusion, God gave us Jesus.

If God didn't withhold from us his very son, will God withhold anything we need? If trust must be earned, hasn't God unequivocally earned our trust with the bark on the raw wounds, the thorns pressed into the brow, your name on cracked lips?

[24 : 15] Hasn't God earned our trust? He's already given us the incomprehensible. So as Mary weeps by the tomb, we believe that she's not been left to her own devices.

We believe that she's not suffering needlessly. Obviously we have the next stage in the picture. We know what happens next but she doesn't. But in that suffering, in that grief, in that sorrow, in that I can't make sense of this whatsoever, nothing fits together, we know that God was with her, Emmanuel, God with us.

So pulling all together to think about the present if you like, and I kind of, you know, I use the word present because, I mean obviously I don't know anybody, everybody's situations far from it, I don't know anybody's.

But it's reasonable to assume in a body this size, there'll be people who can't make sense of their current circumstances. It's reasonable to assume that there are people who are struggling with their faith, who things don't fit together.

So I encourage you to look at Mary and know that, although the clock had stopped there, you'd say well that's her present, she can't do anything about it, that is who she is.

[25 : 43] But the Bible tells us that often times your present circumstances do not define who you are, if that makes sense. You are not your present. We've already established you're not your past, but even, I would go further and say you're not your present.

There's more to you than what's going on right now. Again you have to look forward to the next step to know who you are. Because now again, if you don't believe in God, you don't believe in Jesus and you don't believe in resurrection, then the present is all you've got and you need to make the most of it.

You don't know what tomorrow will bring. It could be better, it could be worse. The present is all you've got. If you have the resurrection, if you have a Savior who's already demonstrated his love and made commitments and promises to you that you know he will keep, then you can withhold judgment and know that the present isn't who you are.

That can be very, very important sometimes when you find the present is pretty awful. The present is not what you expected it to be. So past, present, what about the next stage?

I'll give you a clue. Future. Let's think about the next stage. Where does Mary go from here?

[27 : 05] Well, Mary is remembered, isn't she? I think this is one of the great, great passages of Scripture. It's just very, very exciting.

Mary... Well, look at this a couple of ways, okay? First of all, Mary is where she is by the grave weeping because she is suffering.

You know, Jesus had many, many followers. There's only Mary and one or two others by the grave.

The disciples, this is really interesting. John and Peter came running, I looked at the grave, saw it was empty and thought, I'll go home. Nothing to see here. Mary stayed by the grave.

So it was in her suffering and in her loss and in her sorrow and in her desolation that she was then in the right place to meet Jesus.

[28 : 13] This is kind of difficult for us to get a hold of sometimes, isn't it? At the personal level, sometimes the only place that Jesus can speak to us, the only place where we can hear him is when things aren't the way we are supposed to be.

You know, C.S. Lewis, pain is God's megaphone. We don't like that. I mean, I would fire rather that none of us, particularly me, being selfish, none of us had to suffer to hear Jesus, none of us had to suffer to listen to his voice, none of us had to suffer to learn that he is our resurrected Saviour who loves us.

That would be ideal, but for some reason, and reasons we don't fully understand, clearly, it is in suffering. It is in loss, it is in desolation, it is in sorrow that Jesus comes to us.

So we see that at a very personal level, Mary. She wouldn't have been at the grave side if she hadn't been suffering. It was at the grave side that Jesus came to see her. It's fascinating. But there's a bigger picture here as well.

And remember why the Gospel writers are writing the Gospels under the power of the Holy Spirit? The whole purpose of everything that's in the Gospels is to bring you the story of Jesus.

[29 : 32] Now, they had a wealth material that they excluded, but everything that's there is designed to bring you to this point of understanding that Christ died and Christ has risen, and as a result of that, we are set free from the past, our sins have been forgiven.

So what's fascinating about the story of Mary is that if you look at the way the Gospel writers use her, so to speak, they position her at the cross. Or first of all, they make very clear that she's known Jesus for a long, long time.

She's a follower of Jesus. And then they position her at the cross. So they're saying, this is a witness who saw him suffer. Then, and saw him die. They actually make it, it's not just they see the cross.

They make it quite clear it's after Jesus has died, then saying, by the way, Mary and Mary and the mother of Jesus were here. So they're establishing their credentials as witnesses of the cross, and then witnesses of the burial, which again is really interesting.

This lady, Mary, saw Jesus buried. And then they do this, John does this really interesting thing here in chapter 20, for three times, Mary says words to the effect of they've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they laid him.

[30 : 49] Now, whenever you find in the Gospels that things are repeated, you know, it's probably quite important. So what's going on here? Remember in 1 Corinthians 15, the others, he's appeared, he's appeared, he has appeared.

By the way, he's appeared. Paul wants you to know that Jesus has appeared to many, many witnesses. What does John want you to know here? He wants you to know that Mary does not expect immediate resurrection.

As far as Mary is concerned, until Jesus appears to her in the flesh, she thinks Jesus is a body. All she's concerned about is retrieving this body and giving it a decent burial.

And it's perfectly rational in the context that someone who did not want to see anything more happen with the story of Jesus would have stolen his body. Remember when Osama bin Laden was killed, what did they do?

They buried him at sea. Don't want shrines, you know, places of pilgrimage. This was, in the Middle East, the time was full of shrines to saints which became points of pilgrimage.

[31 : 55] So it's perfectly rational for Mary to see an empty tomb and think someone's stolen the body. And her passion, her desire is not to find a living, breathing saviour, it's to find a corpse and dress it for burial.

Again, that little detail, they were taking the spices to dress the body. So right up until the point that Mary sees Jesus, she does not expect to see him.

And it's brilliant how when she does see him, she doesn't recognise him. Which is just... If you were trying to make this up, I mean, if you were a skeptic and saying the Bible was made up two or three hundred years later, you wouldn't do two things.

You wouldn't have a female as a witness because the time women weren't viewed as credible witnesses in a court of law. Second thing you wouldn't do is have Jesus appearing as a gardener.

You know, some sort of commonplace, oh, looks like the bloke who trims the hedge. You wouldn't have that. You'd have him appearing as light, you know, awesome power. This is the resurrected body of the risen saviour.

[33 : 09] Instead of which Jesus enters, I mean, the first time we see Jesus the saviour, the resurrected from the dead, he looks like a gardener, which I think is fantastic. And there must be a parallel going back to, remember what Adam was put in the world to do?

Look after a garden. And here we have the second Adam, resurrected as a gardener. It's fascinating. Jesus appears to Mary.

Jesus reveals himself to Mary. So her role here was as a witness. So again, there's an interesting thing going on here. You could look at this very callously and say, this is terrible.

Poor Mary's had to suffer all these things just so that she can be a witness. But her role as a witness to the resurrection is an incredible role. The first person in history to see there is a saviour.

So there's two levels here, a very personal level she's suffering. And she doesn't know why, but there are reasons for it. And it's broader level. It's fitted into this broader narrative of this incredible redemptive history.

[34 : 16] Now, how does that affect you and me? Is that just a story for Mary? Because she's in the Bible. Are people in the Bible special?

So they have special stories. And the rest of us, because we're not in the Bible, it's different. There's no evidence from Scripture that it is. All the evidence from Scripture is that we take the stories of the Bible as normative, as kind of patterns.

And I think it's... It can only be that when you and I suffer, if we suffer, it can only be when we are in stories that we don't understand, when our lives don't make sense, we're in that state of disconnection where God appears to be absent, God appears to be distant, God appears to have let us down.

Those situations are not just part of our individual little story. They're part of a broader story of redemption history, where God has bring together peoples from across nations, tribes, languages, generations, and bringing us all together to worship Him.

And we don't know exactly how we all fit in, but we do. You will get to the end, whenever that is, and it will make sense. I don't think Mary would look back and go, I would trade that sight of the risen Savior if I could have been spared that suffering.

[35 : 50] Far from it, it should be more like Paul, surely. Light and momentary sufferings are nothing compared to the eternal weight of glory that is offered to us.

So, these three stages of Mary's life, I hope, give us some kind of perspective. First of all, at the past, you are not defined by your past.

The past is the past. You've been set free from it. Christ has died for your sins. They've been thrown away, and they are no longer what shapes you.

The Bible talks a lot about casting off your old self, and putting on your new self, and being remade in the image of Christ. And that is our destiny. And the old stuff has been cast off like an old cloak, and you're being remade, being made to be truly you as you become more and more like Christ.

So you're not your past. Your present circumstances are variable. Who knows whether they're good, bad or indifferent. But again, you cannot just define yourself by what's going on in the present. We, as children of a father who loves us in heaven, as brothers and sisters of a risen Savior, kind of the confidence that the future is not unknown, that the future is what defines us, and the future is one where all that's passed at one point will, in times to come, will be irrelevant, because we will be set free to serve Jesus forever.

[37 : 24] So that is our future. And so I really would encourage each of us to live in that future. Mary is the first witness to the resurrection, but we are all witnesses to the resurrection also.

And that's something that doesn't stop. I think we'll be celebrating that for all of eternity. It's a very sort of exciting thought.

I'd like to just finish with another quick sort of word from Corinthians, which I think is quite helpful. I've referred to it already, but let's read it again.

2 Corinthians 5 verse 16. So, we do not lose heart, though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

I'm now of a certain age when my outer self is wasting away, but that's all right. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

[38 : 45] For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. So, it's Mary Magdalene, saved from the power of seven devils, a faithful servant of Christ the Saviour, a woman who weeps by an open grave, and a woman who is the first witness of the resurrection that we all celebrate today.

Thank you.