

## **I Know Who You Are!**

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Mark 1:21-28

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Today we heard a story about Jesus healing on the Sabbath. This was required by Jewish law – because all laws, even Sabbath laws, must be broken in order to save the life of a human being because human beings are made in God’s image, and there is nothing more precious. That is still true today. So Jesus, like all Jews, and like us today, was required to do what it takes to preserve human life.

However, what strikes me about the story as I read it this year, is the statement: “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” That recognition is so central. Remember Jesus will later ask his disciples, “Who do you say I am?”

And I then I began wondering, who do people say we are? Are we recognizable by our actions as children of God? As Christians?

So today I want to tell you a story about a woman whose life certainly had its ups and downs. In the midst of it all, she lived her life knowing she was a beloved child of God, and she saw others as children of God.

Mary Stevenson was born on November 8, 1922 in Chester, a suburb of Philadelphia, PA. She had seven brothers and sisters, and they were among the few white people who lived in that black neighborhood. When 3 years old, Mary used to dance in the streets to the music of Duke Ellington as he played on his piano on the sidewalk. One of her neighbors, Ethel Waters, often encouraged her to dance to the song “Sweet Georgia Brown.” Of course, this was long before those two musicians were famous! They called her the "little white cracker."

When Mary was 6 years old, her mother went to the sanitarium because she had tuberculosis. Mary said her mother assured her that she would come back, but she never did. As a result, her father was left to raise all 8 children by himself and support them with his work as a laborer in the docks of Philadelphia.

Mary was the next to youngest child. She didn't make her father's life easy. She would complain, “You can't cook like Mama! The oatmeal has lumps and I won't eat it.” She didn't want to go to school in the mismatched clothes that her father mended poorly. And she was nicknamed “Disease” by the other 1st graders. They would say, “Your mom died of TB -- Disease! Disease!” And they shunned her.

The Depression hit. The Stevenson children were so hungry that they ate the plaster off the walls. They stole tar from a nearby construction site and ate it so that their hunger pains would stop. They were called “tar babies” at school. When their teachers found out, the school began giving them a glass of milk and cookies each day. But Mary wanted to go to school less and less.

The only one who understood her was her brother, Nelson. He'd say, "Dance, honey, dance!" and Mary would go out on a street corner, put a little dish out and dance. Sometimes people put a penny in, and that meant a lot.

Mary loved to dance. She loved to be the first one out on the sidewalk in new snow and dance in it. Sometimes she'd walk in the snow and put an extra footstep in, so that it looked as if a three-legged person had walked there. Then she'd take a step and step over and come back to it so that it looked like two people walking. Then, suddenly, she would let that person disappear and she would walk normally. People would come by and wonder what had happened.

Dance went out of her life for a while when her brother Nelson died. He drowned when he was only 10 years old. Mary prayed to God, "Why did you take the two people I love the most?" Even then, she said that God was very real for her, like a bright light.

Mary was a descendant of Robert Louis Stevenson. He died 30 years before she was born. Like her famous relative, Mary also wrote poems. She would show her poems to her father, but he said they were just words, just rubbish. When she was 8, she wrote this poem:

There is a man in the sky  
He tells me what to write  
Sometimes I am asleep  
But I get up each night  
"Put these things I tell you  
So you don't forget  
On a piece of paper  
Before the sun has set  
Call on me if you need me  
Call my name and I'll be there  
For I am the Son of God  
And I am everywhere."

She said that God was telling her the words to write -- poems -- and she'd get up in the middle of the night and write them down.

One day, in 1936, when Mary was 14 years old, she was locked outside the house in the snow. She saw a cat walking by. It made footprints in the snow. She pulled out a pencil stub and wrote -- not about footprints in the snow -- but about footprints in the sand, because it would be warm in a sandy place. She wrote, "One night I dreamed I was walking along a beach with the Lord . . ."

The poem was very meaningful to her. She knew God had been carrying her, and that God gave her those words to write.

Later that year, she finished the 8th grade. She told her father, "I'm not going back to school." He gave in. Mary started secretly dating a boy named Tony. Her father was so angry about this that he beat her until her earrings fell off. Then he locked her in the basement. In the cold of the basement, her only warmth was her hatred of her father and the thought that she would find a way to get out of that house.

When Mary was 16 she eloped with Tony. He was wealthy and ten years older. He had diamonds and a big car. Mary became a Catholic to please Tony's mother. She tried to please him, too. But, ultimately, she wasn't able to please either of them.

Mary and Tony lived in a cheap apartment. Tony would go home to eat with his own family, but he would only bring a small amount of food back to the apartment to share with Mary. Soon Mary was pregnant and the food Tony brought home was not enough for her and for her unborn child. She asked him for more food. Tony responded by beating her. Finally, when he threw her down the stairs, their landlady called an ambulance. The staff at the hospital didn't think Mary or the baby would survive, but they did.

Mary decided that she was finished with Tony. So she went to live with her father. She was 17 years old. When the baby was born, she saw how tender her father was toward the child. She saw how he'd missed her mother and how hard it must have been for him all those years. She realized how cruel she had been to him. She said, "Daddy, I'm going to name my son after you." And she named her son Andrew.

Soon Tony was back. He wanted to reconcile with Mary. He said that things would be different. He begged and begged her to forgive him. So she did. But, she said, she was naive enough to think that forgiving someone meant that you had to go back to the relationship. Foolishly, she went back to him.

For a few weeks things were fine. Then Tony began to be abusive to both Mary and Andrew. He put deadbolts on the outside of the apartment doors and locked her in when he was gone so that she couldn't get out.

Mary began saving every penny she could. In the dead of winter, on Christmas Eve, Mary bought a bus ticket so that she could flee with her baby. Her destination was Claremore, Oklahoma because her mother's sister lived there. When she arrived at the bus station, Mary used her last few dollars to pay for a taxi to her aunt's house. After the taxi pulled up at the house, Mary discovered that her aunt had moved to Texas the day before, and left no forwarding address.

So, it was Christmas, and Mary and her child were homeless. She walked to a park and crawled under a tree. It was snowing. Baby Andrew was tucked under her arm. She held her poem "Footprints" tightly in her other hand. Mary watched her own footprints disappear under the falling snow until they all vanished. And then she gave up.

She woke up on the Cheyenne reservation. The Cheyenne had found her, "the baby with a baby," under the tree. When she asked them how they found her, they replied, "We followed the footprints." "But there weren't any footprints," Mary insisted. The Cheyenne kept telling her over and over, "We followed the footprints."

Mary stayed with the Cheyenne for a year. She loved her time there -- especially dancing to Native American music and drums.

Then Mary heard that her brother Andrew had joined the Marines. She also found out that Tony had left Philadelphia and was fighting in the war. Her father was getting remarried, too, and he wanted her to come home. So Mary took her son to Philadelphia. She rented an apartment and

went to work. But, with only an 8th grade education, she could barely find enough work to pay her rent and buy groceries. Mary gave the food she could afford to her son, and did without herself. Soon, she weighed only 90 pounds.

When Tony returned from the war, he and his mother took Mary to court and sued for sole custody of their son. Tony had money and lawyers, so he won. The judge told Mary to get her life together. He said this would only be a temporary order -- if she could get her life together, he would reconsider it. Getting her son back became Mary's main goal.

In order to earn more money, Mary worked double shifts. But she was only able to get menial jobs that didn't pay very well. Then she saw a sign at a theater that said "Showgirls Wanted." Mary auditioned. When they asked her what music she wanted to use for the audition, Mary asked if the pianist knew "Sweet Georgia Brown." She danced, and the accompanist gave her a standing ovation. Mary got the job -- earning an incredible \$50 each week.

So now Mary was a stripper in a burlesque house. Her stage name was "Stevie Richards." Her father was appalled and embarrassed. Mary explained that it was the only way she could earn enough money to get her son back. But her father was convinced that Mary was likely to lose her son by doing this.

Mary soon discovered the other dancers were in sad plights, just like she was. So Mary gave each of the dancers a copy of her poem, "Footprints." The other dancers said that the poem was their story, too.

One night, Tony showed up at the theater. He told her that no judge in the world would award a son to a mother who danced half-naked before drunken men. Mary replied, "Well, his father is one of the drunken men." Tony left, but Mary knew he was probably right.

When she could, Mary gave up dancing. Her sisters had moved to Southern California, so Mary joined them there. Her sisters found her job in a local hospital. All the while, Mary never gave up on her dream of getting her son back.

In California, Mary met Basil Zengari and fell in love. He wanted to help her get her son back, too. When they married, Mary was 26 years old. Soon the couple had a home in Buena Park. Eventually they had a son they named Basil, Jr.

When Mary's brother Andrew died of the wounds he received in WWII, Mary returned for a visit to Philadelphia. She saw her son Andy then, for the first time in years. She told him that she missed him. Andy told his mother that she didn't miss him, because if she really missed him she would have written him letters. Mary replied that she had written lots of letters. And then she knew what Tony had done. He'd confiscated all of her letters to Andy. Of course, Andy didn't want to go back to California with his mother, but Mary kept hoping that something would work out some day.

During this time that Mary saw her poem, "Footprints in the Sand" in print for the first time, but the author was listed as "Anonymous." She approached several attorneys about this, but they all discouraged her from pursuing her claim to the poem because she didn't seem to have any proof that she'd written it.

Mary didn't have time to worry about the poem because she contracted polio. She was completely paralyzed. She prayed, "Oh God, no! I don't want you to have to carry me all of the time! I'm a dancer; I want to dance."

Eventually, Mary was able to move her right arm. She believed it was a message from God: "Write! You don't have to dance. Write." Feeling soon came back in her left arm, and then in her legs. Eventually, Mary was able to walk, but you could always see the traces of polio in her step.

As soon as Mary recovered, Basil was in an industrial accident. He was disabled for a long time. They used all their savings to pay the medical bills. It was a discouraging time. One day, Basil said to her, "Honey, there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

Mary said, "It came to me. No, it was at the beginning, and it's been with us all of the time. I don't have to live and go back and try to change the past. I have to make my life count now. I know what it's like to be black, Native American, poor, homeless, hungry, abused as a child, and beaten as a wife, to have the people you love the most die, to struggle with only an 8th grade education, and to be a teenage mother. God has carried me through all this -- now it's my responsibility to carry someone else who's going through the same thing. I saw the purpose of my life -- to reach out, to share the light with others."

At this point, Mary was a waitress at the TWA cafeteria. The next day, an unshaven, shaggy man came in. When he paid her a dime for his cup of coffee, she slipped it back to him and said that he might need it for something else. He came back. They began to have conversations. And every day, Mary would slip the man's money back.

One day, the man said he'd like to ask the boss for a pepper steak. Mary said, "You don't have to wait; it's on the house." She made him a pepper steak with all the fixings. Then, strangely, he didn't come in the next day.

A few days later, Mary's boss gave her a large raise. Mary told her boss that she'd been giving away food and that she'd pay him back. Her boss said, "I know. The man told me, and he told me to give you a raise. That man was Howard Hughes. He owns the airline!"

Not long after, Mary took in Jenny, a pregnant teenager. Basil objected at first, but Mary said, "Just this once." Jenny named her baby Stevie after Mary, and later Jenny asked how she could ever repay her. Mary told her to just pass the light on. After Jenny, another girl came to live with Mary and Basil, and then another.

Mary kept caring for others and volunteering at the Anaheim General Hospital. She often brought garden flowers and poems to folks in the hospital rooms.

Then, one day, Mary got a phone call. "Mom, it's Andy. I'm coming to see you." When Andy had helped his father move, he'd discovered the stack of letters his father had never let him see. They were the letters his mother had written to him all those years. Mary said that the happiest day of her life was the day that Andy came out to California with his fiancée.

The Vietnam War was escalating and Mary felt that she needed to do something for the soldiers. She decided to bake cookies. She organized a group called "Vietmoms." Mary put an ad in the paper, asking for scout troops, anyone, to come over and bake. Her oven was on 24 hours a day.

They baked millions of cookies. The Marines came to her home and picked up boxes of cookies twice a week. Every box had a copy of her poem "Footprints" in it. She also collected clothing and school supplies for children in Vietnam, and when there was an earthquake in Mexico, she collected blankets for the homeless. President Johnson thanked her for her caring. Her city named her the Citizen of the Year.

During all of this, what came to mind was something that her brother Andrew had said before he died: "The only way to win a war is to make certain that it never starts." Her son, Andy, once said, "Mom, if you'd been Secretary of Defense, you would've invited all the Viet Cong over for a spaghetti dinner!" Her response? "We've got to learn to love each other."

In 1979, she met Kathy Bee Hampton, a country singer. Kathy and other people kept telling Mary that they'd seen copies of her poem. One day Mary saw it printed on a greeting card. She was shocked to see "author unknown" at the bottom of it. "I'm not unknown," she thought. "That's my story, written by a 14 year old girl. A real person wrote that poem."

Mary began seeing her poem on plaques and on coffee cups. She wrote the company saying that she was the author, but they never answered her letter. She went to a lawyer and asked if anything could be done. He asked if she'd copyrighted it. She said, "No." He told her that she could challenge it, but that it would take a lot of money. Mary didn't have that kind of money, and she said that even if she did, she wouldn't spend it on that.

In 1980, Mary's beloved husband, Basil, died. Then her father died. To the end of his life, her father always said that he never understood where her poems came from.

Mary decided she needed a change of scenery, so she moved to Las Vegas to be with Kathy Bee. Once she even went on stage with Kathy Bee and danced to "Sweet Georgia Brown." Mary got a standing ovation that night.

When she began packing to move to Las Vegas in 1984, Mary discovered a small suitcase she had forgotten since she moved into the Buena Park house with Basil in 1959. The suitcase was full of many treasures, including a postcard her mother wrote in 1907. It was also full of the poems Mary had written over the years. Among them was a copy of "Footprints in the Sand." It was the very same one Mary had when she nearly froze to death in the snow near Claremore, Oklahoma when she was 17 years old. It was one of the copies Mary had made and dated 1939, just three years after she wrote the original. Later that year, in 1984, the U.S. copyright office awarded Mary the copyright for "Footprints in the Sand" -- 48 years after it was written.

Then a woman in Canada began claiming that she wrote "Footprints" in 1964, and she challenged Mary's copyright. Mary sent the 1939 copy to the well-known forensic specialist Kurt Schwalbe. On May 3, 1997, the results came back. The forensic team had determined, after extensive investigation, that that Mary's poem was authentic. They reported that the poem was written before 1945 and it was in Mary Stevenson's handwriting. Mary's poem was much older than the one claimed by the woman in Canada. The poem remained copyrighted in Mary Stevenson's name. Although it was already in the public domain, and Mary would never receive any royalties from it, at least she began to be recognized as its author.

In 1986, Mary wrote a song for Kathy Bee about child abuse, something Mary knew about first-hand. That song, "Momma Don't You Love Me," became Kathy Bee's theme song. It won an

award as the Song of the Year from the California Country Music Association in 1986. The royalties from that song and from everything else that Mary wrote went -- and still go -- to fight child abuse.

Then, in 1992, Mary met author Gail Giorgio. Gail had been a missionary in Oahu with the Hawaii Mission of the United Methodist Church. Mary's poem, "Footprints," had been comfort to Gail when she was being abused as a child and as a teenager in the 1950s. They agreed that Gail should be the person to write Mary's life story, so she did.

The year I first heard this story, in 1997, Mary Stevenson was awarded the Racial Harmony Lifetime Achievement Award in Hollywood, at the "Unity Under the Stars" Racial Harmony Hall of Fame Banquet, August 9th, 1997. The presenter said this, "The reason why we are giving this Lifetime Achievement Award to Mary Stevenson is because she (like Leeza Gibbons and Montel Williams, who are receiving Racial Harmony Hall of Fame Awards that same night) has promoted Racial Understanding and Harmony all her life. Earlier in her life, Ms. Stevenson could have been lynched for taking this stand."

Mary died a year and a half later, in January, 1999.

Before this, back in 1996, Mary had been in a coma. The doctors said that she died. But when she regained consciousness, she said she had an experience during that near death. She told her son Basil: "There was a long dark tunnel and bright light. I'm here just to tell you that the light isn't just at the end of the tunnel; it's at the beginning. And no matter how dark the night of the journey, that light is always with us. Share the light."

### **Sources:**

Footprints in the Sand by Mary Stevenson, <http://www.footprints-inthe-sand.com/>

Also "Footprints," a sermon preached by Don Fado in 1997

See also *Footprints in the Sand: The Inspiring Life Behind the Immortal Poem* by Gail Brewer-Giorgio

### **Texts:**

**Footprints in the Sand** (1939 version) by Mary Stevenson

One night I dreamed I was walking  
Along the beach with the Lord.  
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.  
In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.  
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints.  
Other times there were one set of footprints.  
This bothered me because I noticed that  
During the low periods of my life when I was  
Suffering from anguish, sorrow, or defeat,  
I could see only one set of footprints,

So I said to the Lord, “You promised me,  
Lord, that if I followed You,  
You would walk with me always.  
But I noticed that during the most trying periods  
Of my life there have only been  
One set of prints in the sand.  
Why, When I have needed You most,  
You have not been there for me?”  
The Lord replied,  
“The times when you have seen only one set of footprints  
Is when I carried you.”

**Mark 1:21-28**

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.