

## Welcome

Can I introduce you to my favorite Superhero?

It's not Batman (I know, this is big news for many of you. Honestly, it surprised me too!). But in the last couple of years, a new hero has taken first place in my heart. Her name is Doreen Green, aka the Unbeatable Squirrel Girl.

[Squirrel Girl 0] Doreen has all the powers of a squirrel *and* a girl, including a tail, super-strength and the power of friendship. Doreen is also a computer science major at Empire State University. And while she's not afraid to kick butts and eat nuts, the reason I love her is that she nearly never has to. She uses her brains to fight crime - and often invites criminals to become better versions of themselves.

Take the time she fought Rhino from Unbeatable Squirrel Girl Issue #17. Rhino has just stolen some shoes, and Squirrel Girl busts him. I want to show you what happens next:

[Squirrel Girl Images 1-6] ([find them here](#))

Rhino leaves, repentant of his crime and committed to live up to the person Doreen sees in him.

I love this moment not only because it's hilarious, but because it's true in the sense that the best stories are true. Too many of us know what it's like to be the Rhino, to feel like everyone who sees us see something unlovable - at least if they get to know us well enough.

The idea that someone could swoop into our lives and see not a rhino but a unicorn sounds too good to be true (like maybe it could only happen in a comic book). But friends, today we're going to see that we're all unicorns. And we're going to see how Jesus sees the unicorn in us. Like Squirrel Girl, Jesus reveals our truest selves, the person we were created to be. Jesus sees through the thick skins we wear to protect ourselves from the world and he calls us to be our truest selves.

Even better, once we have stepped into the light of Jesus' truth, we are able to see others' true selves. We become like Squirrel Girl, with the power to call others to find their true selves in Jesus as well.

## Message

In this season after Easter, we're working through the "I Am" statements Jesus made in the Gospel of John. "I Am" is a translation of Yahweh, the name of God. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear he's God by calling himself "I Am". But he also makes statements like "I am the Way" or "I am the resurrection" to reveal what it means that he is God.

Our series is called "Monday Messiah" because what Jesus reveals to us about his godhood. Jesus came not just for our religious experiences - our Sunday mornings. He came for our everyday lives. That's why he uses images like sheep, vines and bread - though they're strange to us, they were part of the

everyday lives of Israel. So we're asking how Jesus matters in our everyday lives. What difference does Jesus make on *Monday*?

[Scripture Slide] We're almost to the end of this series. Today, Jesus claims, "I am the light of the world." Jesus as the light is one of the key themes of John's Gospel, and it's one we've been exploring off and on since we began Lent clear back in February. So today is going to be a review and recap of a lot of what we've been talking about over the past several months.

In John 8, Jesus tells an assembled crowd, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." -- John 8:12

That echoes what the opening of the Gospel told us: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. -- John 1:5

If you're anything like me, when you hear the terms 'light and darkness', it immediately conjures big, cosmic battles of good vs evil. In other words, light and dark don't feel particularly connected to our everyday experiences of balancing our families, jobs, commitments, activities, hobbies and relationships.

But theologian Peter Rollins reflects on the role light - and by extension light as the love of Jesus - plays in our daily lives:

When we are sitting with friends we do not think about the light that surrounds us but only of the friends that the light enables us to see. Likewise love illuminates others and so our attention is focused on what she illuminates rather than with the illumination itself.

Love, in a very precise way, enables us to see. For in daily life we perceive others in much the same way as a cow gazes at cars. We walk past thousands of people without really seeing anyone... When we love, our beloved is brought out of the vast, undulating sea of others. Just as the Torah speaks of God calling forth beings from the formless ferment of being so love calls our beloved from the endless ocean of undifferentiated objects.

In this way love is not proud and arrogant. It does not say, "I am sublime, I am beautiful, I am glorious". Love humbly points to another and whispers, "they are sublime, they are beautiful, they are glorious." -- Peter Rollins

If love is light, then sin is darkness. If love enables us to see each other (and ourselves), then sin is the darkness that makes others and ourselves invisible to us. This is why Thomas Merton, one of the most important religious figures in the 20th century described a life of sin as a false, shadow self:

EVERY one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of

God’s will and God’s love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin. All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface. But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am my own mistake. -- Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

[Scripture Slide 2] John uses a Jewish leader named Nicodemus to illustrate the danger of this shadow self in John 3. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a wealthy, urban, educated Jewish male. In other words, from the outside, he's about as in the center of the light as you could expect someone to be. But he comes to Jesus in the middle of the night - in the dark.

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. -- John 3:1-5

Like all of us, Nicodemus has a shadow self. He had put a lot of stock in his status. His wealth, education and privilege let him know his place in society. But now Jesus tells him none of those earthly things matter. He has to start over, be born again, into a new, spiritual world. Rebirth, in other words, would cost Nicodemus his shadow self. The time of his visit says a lot about where he is, and Jesus uses it as an opportunity to shed some light on his mission (this was one of our Lent texts, so it'll sound familiar to many of you):

This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants." -- John 3:16-21

When we looked at this passage during Lent, we saw that Jesus didn't come to judge the world but to rescue us. We judge *ourselves* when we reject God's light.

In other words, when the light of Jesus' truth shines on us, many of us don't want to face the truth. We'd rather hide behind our shadow selves. The impulse makes sense - our shadow self is what has protected us for a lot of years. We've become convinced we *need* it to function in the world.

Many of us, like Nicodemus, are afraid of what Jesus would ask of us. We don't want to make changes in our lives, sacrifices in our schedules, our finances, our lifestyles. We like the lives we've built, and we don't actually *want* to be reborn.

Others of us are afraid of the risks Jesus asks us to make. We think he might actually be serious about that whole 'pick up your cross and follow me' thing, and we don't want to welcome outsiders, make peace instead of protecting or other risks that leave us vulnerable.

We don't *want* to be sacrificial, patient, kind and generous. We're threatened by the idea of gentleness in the face of power, faithfulness in the face of betrayal and self-control in a culture of indulgence.

Like Nicodemus, we can't part with our shadow selves. But John gives us hope: after Jesus was crucified, two men stepped forward to claim his body for burial. This was a big deal because a crucified person was usually thrown into a common grave, not even buried. They were considered cursed by God and an enemy of Rome. To be seen with them publicly was to bring shame on yourself.

As John tells us:

Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus' body. When Pilate gave permission, Joseph came and took the body away. 39 With him came Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus at night. He brought about seventy-five pounds of perfumed ointment made from myrrh and aloes. -- John 19:38-39

Nicodemus, the man who couldn't part with his position and privilege to be reborn appears beside the crucified body of Jesus. He has finally come to stand in the light, ready to be seen by all, caring for the body of the God who died for him.

Nicodemus has seen the light. He has cast off his shadow self, throwing aside his cultural power and position to be seen standing with Jesus. Nicodemus has come into the light and found his true self.

Friends, this is what Jesus does for us. When we have the courage to set aside our shadow selves and sit in the light of God's truth, we don't find condemnation or judgment. We find love, welcome and peace. We find our true selves, the Self Paul says is hidden with Christ in God.

And when we rediscover our true selves, the light of Jesus begins to shine from our lives as well, illuminating others so they too can find who they truly are (just like Squirrel Girl did for the Rhino). I would not be the person I am today were it not for the countless friends, family, professors and mentors who saw not the self-conscious, self-absorbed, selfish me I hid behind, but the true me, the me God created peeking out from behind my shadow self. I continue to become more and more of who I was created to be because of your love for me, allowing me to become the unicorn you see in me.

As I learn to live in Jesus' light more and more, I find myself becoming ever more patient, kind and gentle. And I find I can see the unicorn in others as well, peeking out from the rhinos they're hiding behind. Jesus' love enables me to love them as they are, to see them as they truly are, and to invite them into Jesus' light as well.

Friends, this is the great gift of God: when we step into the light, we become light. When we rest in Jesus' love, we become love.

#### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] By coming to Jesus' table, we step into the light of his love for us. We leave overflowing with love to share with the world.

#### **Assignment + Blessing**

Tell someone the truth about themselves.