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# The Greatest Love Story Ever Told and then some!

The Gospels retold  
for teenagers

Rosie Rushton

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Ever Told –  
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## About the author

Rosie Rushton is the author of more than forty best-selling books for teenagers and young adults. She has been a youth officer in her local church and for several years was a Governor at a C of E secondary school and is a Lay Reader.

Her great loves are swimming in the sea, going to the theatre, reading, sharing meals with friends, exploring new forms of worship and reverting to childhood with her six grandchildren. She is rather less keen on dusting, bigotry and being sensible.

In the biographies at the front of previous books, she stated that her ambition was to write the book that has been pounding in her head for years. *The Greatest Love Story Ever Told – And Then Some!* is it!

She now has two new ambitions: to visit China and to learn to sing in tune. She holds out rather more hope for the first than the latter.



# PART ONE

## **Mary's Story**



## Rooftop revelations

‘She’s not like the other girls.’

‘My Rebekah says her daydreaming is getting worse than ever – she left her bucket at the well yesterday and just ambled off, humming to herself.’

‘That’s all she ever does – talk to herself and sing and skip about! She’s fourteen, for heaven’s sake – way too old for that kind of behaviour.’

‘She’ll have to get her act together once she’s in Joseph’s house – hardworking man like him won’t be doing with an airhead for a wife!’

As their peals of laughter rang out over the sound of her neighbours’ grinding stones, Mary drew back from the doorway, glad that they hadn’t spotted her – and more than a little annoyed at their perception of her. Airhead indeed! She did more thinking than the rest of her friends put together – and not about the boys in the next village either. And so what if she liked to sing and compose songs in her head? She got that from her mother and sometimes, when the pain of missing her was almost too much to bear, she would hum the songs that they had sung together while Anne taught her to grind grain or knead bread. That morning, she had been close to tears; there were so many questions she needed to have answered, and there was no one she could ask. Her cousin Leah was kind enough, in a brisk, don’t-get-under-my-feet sort of way, but on the few occasions that Mary had tried to voice her feelings, Leah had looked at her as if she was mad and told her to stop being fanciful and get on with her chores. All that the other girls in the village seemed to want was to be betrothed like her and have a home of their own; they thought she was weird because she wanted to talk about why things were as they were, and what the world might be



like where the Romans came from and . . . oh so many things. Things her parents would have encouraged her to explore, things Anne, her mother, would have woven stories about. But her parents weren't here and even her prayers brought Mary little comfort right now; knowing that her mother rested with God was one thing – but somehow it didn't fill the hole in her chest or ease the tightness in her throat.

Especially today. The fourth anniversary of her mother's death and still the pain was as sharp as ever. Leah was not one to talk about Mary's parents; she believed that the past was the past and it was only the present that mattered. Mary often wished that it had been cousin Elizabeth who had taken her in; Elizabeth had been Mary's mother's favourite relative, always smiling and seeing the best in everything. But Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah didn't live in Nazareth and it had been her father's wish for Mary to be brought up where he had been born and where his ancestors had lived for generations.

Thinking of her parents, Mary could once again feel the burning of unshed tears behind her eyes, and the persistent throbbing of the headache that had niggled at her since she awoke that morning was making her feel nauseous in the increasing heat.

Rebekah's mother had been right in one respect: Mary wasn't like the other girls. For one thing, her parents had been fiercely protective of her – after many miscarriages and stillbirths, the arrival of Mary had been more than they had dared to hope for. Their home, built of the white limestone quarried from the nearby mountains, was conveniently situated on the outskirts of the village, a fact that made it easy for Mary's mother, who had always been a very private and introverted person (some in the village went as far as to call her stuck up) to keep her treasured infant away from any family in the area who displayed the merest hint of illness or whose way of life was a somewhat liberal interpretation of the law of Moses. And when Mary's father Joachim dropped dead in the field two weeks after Mary's sixth birthday, Anne clung to her even more fiercely, never letting her out of her sight, and devoting every waking moment to her precious daughter.

So when her peers – Anna, Rebekah, Judith – were running up and down the streets, collecting pebbles for their games of jacks or

climbing the neighbouring hills to gather flowers to decorate their hair, Mary had been close at her mother's side, learning her letters, memorising the uses of the plants and herbs that grew on their small patch of land, and listening to the songs her mother loved to hum softly as she worked. On their journeys to the well, Mary would eye the other children shyly, but while they ran off from their mothers, shrieking and laughing, one look from Anne kept Mary obediently at her side. It did little for her relationships with her peers, but she became an excellent eavesdropper, soaking up the chatter of the village women and storing it away to ponder on as she lay on her mattress pretending to be asleep.

And then one day her mother got sick. The rash that started on her chest spread over her whole body, which jerked and thrashed as the fever gripped her. Within two days, she was dead. Mary was alone.

It was Leah, Joachim's first cousin, who took her in. Unlike the other villagers, she didn't worry about contagion or wait to see whether Mary too would succumb to the fever, but quietly led the sobbing child down the hill to her own tiny house, knowing that of course, no food could be prepared in a home where there had been a death, and understanding that even a grieving ten year old needed a good meal each day. Leah's two daughters were both married, her husband Samuel was set in his ways and somewhat demanding, and despite grumbling a lot to her neighbours, secretly she was happy to have another youngster in the house; someone who would look up to her, obey her and hopefully make herself useful now that every joint in Leah's body seemed to scream out in protest whenever she bent down to sweep or lift a bucket.

And, she muttered to her friend Deborah, hopefully the child would now lead a more normal life – would play with the other children and get some colour into those pale cheeks.

Four years on, Mary still felt like an outsider; the other girls all had their own cliques and while they weren't unkind to her, they still viewed her as different; they laughed at the way she would suddenly go off in a trance in the middle of a conversation, whispering to herself or smiling in what they called 'that weird way'. They felt slightly embarrassed by her penetrating questions about things they

never gave more than a passing thought to – heaven and hell, the purpose of life, why some people were born healthy while others, like Naomi's youngest, could neither see nor speak. But what bewildered them the most was that she wouldn't talk about her betrothal or join in the giggling speculation about what it would be like to be a wife.

A wife. As she slapped the thin flat circles of dough she had been kneading for the past half hour onto the hot stones in the fire, she thought yet again about what Leah had said to her that morning.

'Soon it will be time, child – time for you to leave us and go to the house of your betrothed. You are indeed a fortunate young woman. Joseph is a good, reliable man, his business is thriving thanks to his hard work, and he will expect . . .'

And as her cousin, bent now from the pain in her back, listed the duties of a good Nazarene wife, Mary had done what she always did when the thoughts in her head became too overwhelming. She kept her head bowed, she nodded compliantly while all the time praying silently and fervently in her head.

'Oh Lord my God, I know I am a dreamer and I'm sorry that I get into trouble for having what cousin Leah calls stupid fancies . . . but please my God don't let my life be boring. Let me do something – anything – that will make some sense of why you kept me alive and took my mother and father away. Let it all have been for a good reason.'

She wasn't sure that she should pray to Yahweh in that manner, but her mother had always told her that God knew the thoughts of her innermost heart and so he must surely know her dreams too. And since her mother had also assured her that everything she was and ever would be was part of Yahweh's great design and that he loved her with a love greater than anything she could possibly imagine; well, then, was it so very bad to ask him if she could be something more than just Mary, orphan of Anne and Joachim, grateful recipient of the charity of Samuel and Leah?

'God will have some special purpose for you, my child . . .'

Mary's mother's words rang in her head, blotting out Leah's oft repeated instructions on the correct way to prepare wool for spinning.

‘. . . perhaps you will be a great storyteller.’ And at this point, her mother would always chuckle. ‘Heaven knows, you have enough imaginings in that little head of yours!’

It was true. Mary loved stories; she had grown up with them. Her father had begun teaching her the basics of the Torah, the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Moses and Elijah as soon as she could sit still enough on his knee to listen – but it was the wonderful word pictures that her mother would weave while teaching Mary to press olives or grind barley – stories about great women of the past; Esther, Deborah, Ruth, Jael that had fired Mary’s imagination the most.

‘Tell me more, tell me more,’ she would beg, and her mother would pull her closer and begin the story again, always with the same words.

‘Well, I don’t know any more, not for a fact, but you know what I think?’

And then she would describe the way Esther looked, what Deborah liked to wear, what made them angry and what they did when they had a spare hour to themselves.

‘I’m only imagining, of course,’ her mother would point out repeatedly, but Mary didn’t care. Imagining brought her heroines to life, imagining made her believe that just possibly amazing things really could happen to ordinary people.

‘I want to be like them,’ Mary would say. ‘Brave and clever. And important.’

And on the days when her chores seemed endless and all she wanted to do was wander off by herself and daydream, she would pout and frown and mutter under her breath, ‘I bet they didn’t have to spend all day doing boring stuff like making oil and feeding chickens.’ And her mother would place her hands on her shoulders and fix her steely grey eyes on hers.

‘Just remember one thing,’ she would whisper. ‘Whatever God has for you to do, be it crushing an olive or teaching a child or saving a nation . . . that is what you do. It is not for us to question God’s will for our lives.’

That, thought Mary to herself with a sigh now, as she flipped the flatbread over on the coals, is all very well. But surely God had got

enough women to get married and bear children and milk goats; did he really need her to do the same as all the others? She knew that wasn't really the problem; of course she wanted a home and a family, but the truth was that she was scared. She wanted time to stand still; she was frightened of becoming a wife. Leah constantly repeated to her the teachings of the wise Solomon on the subject. That a good wife does her husband good, and not harm; works wool and flax with willing hands, rises in the dark of the night to provide food, spins, weaves and never, ever 'eats the bread of idleness'.

Mary sighed. These were all the things she was bad at; there was no mention of making music, singing songs or telling stories. What if she messed up? What if she didn't please Joseph? What if the food she cooked wasn't to his liking? And what if he too laughed at her – or worse, got angry with her? And the other stuff . . . the things her friends whispered about? The thing you did if you wanted a family. That sounded scary, far more scary she thought than leading an army into battle like Deborah, or standing up to the king like Esther.

Not that Joseph wasn't kind – he was, of that she was sure. OK, he was older than her, nearly twenty-one in fact – and quiet, withdrawn even; she couldn't imagine him bursting into song or dancing on the spot. But when he had come to Samuel's house for the betrothal, he had spoken with a deep, soft voice reminiscent of her father's, and Leah had said that his smile lit up his whole face when he looked at her. Mary didn't know whether that was true, of course; she had kept her eyes firmly on the floor. To be honest, it wasn't so much Joseph she feared; it was herself. She wanted to stay just as she was. She didn't want to give herself to anyone at all. She thought that if she did, she might just get lost and never find the Mary that was hidden inside.

That's why her friends thought she was strange. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps this restlessness, this constant dreaming of something that seemed just out of reach but which she was sure was there – maybe it was all the result of what Leah called her overactive imagination.

From outside she could hear the chattering of Rebekah and Joanna as they passed her house on their way to take food to the men who were planting in the nearby fields, and for a moment, she was tempted to join them. Without even the slightest breeze from outside blowing

through the narrow doorway, the heat in the kitchen was becoming intense. She lifted her arm and mopped the sweat from her brow with her sleeve. She knew it would not be long before Leah was back from the marketplace, expecting Mary to join her in sorting and carding the last of the wool from their three goats. Even listening to Rebekah's gossiping and Joanna's obsession with Benjamin would be preferable to that.

Lifting the baked bread from the coals and setting it to cool, she peeped out of the doorway. No sign of Leah as yet. If she could just get some air, lie down for a few minutes, perhaps she would feel less agitated.

She climbed up the steps onto the flat roof and gingerly touched the floor with her toe. The fresh coat of clay plaster which Samuel had applied the week before in preparation for the coming of the rains had hardened and Mary saw that Leah had begun spreading out the laundry to dry in the sun once more. Even up here, the air was heavy with the threat of thunder. Across the street, Aphia and Tirzah, the children of Tabitha, Leah's closest friend, were bowling a hoop and shrieking with delight; in the distance, Mary could see the stooped backs of the workers in the field, diligently plucking weeds from the furrows.

She lay down on the matting spread in the far corner and closed her eyes, rubbing her temples with her second and third fingers in the hope of easing the pounding. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the faint strains of a lute, its notes obliterated from time to time by the angry barking of a dog. For the first time that day, she felt her whole body begin to relax. Her eyelids became heavy, and the tightness in her chest eased. She slept.

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'No! What . . . who?'

Suddenly she was alert, every fibre of her being taut and ready to jump to her feet. Except that she couldn't move. As she opened her eyes, the brightness of the noonday sun was so dazzling that all she could see at first were black spots dancing across her field of vision. She put her hand to her forehead to shield the light but the light didn't go away.

And then she saw him. Or thought she did – but it couldn't be. She was still dreaming. She had to be. Because what she thought she could see was an angel. And angels didn't stand on the roofs of humble houses in Nazareth.

'Hello, Mary. Mary, you are wonderful, beautiful . . .'

No, it couldn't be an angel. Angels didn't do flattery. It was a man. And he shouldn't be here. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound came out. She tried to scramble to her feet, but her legs were leaden, as if anchored to the dusty floor by an iron weight.

'Hush, Mary, it's OK, God is with you. There is no need to be frightened. God has sent me to you.'

Suddenly, the panic left her to be replaced by a huge wave of guilt and shame. Her mind was flooded with the memories of her prayers to God that morning – all those requests for how she wanted her life to be. And now she was to be punished – and rightly so, because what was it her father used to say? Wait patiently for God's plan and never question his purposes.

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The angel Gabriel was sent from God to Nazareth, a town of Galilee, to a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to Joseph, a descendant of David. The angel, as he approached her, said 'Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you.'

*Luke 1:26-28*

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'I'm sorry, I . . . God . . .'

She tried to close her eyes, to avert her gaze from the shining face of the angel but it seemed as if her body and her will had left her.

'Listen to me, Mary. You are going to have a baby – a son, who you must call Jesus.'

So I am dreaming, Mary thought and almost laughed out loud. A baby indeed! That was one thing she knew for sure couldn't possibly be true.

'God has chosen you to be the mother of his son . . .'

'What . . . ?'

‘Your son will be great; he will be called the Son of God and he will claim back the throne of your ancestor David.’

‘No . . .’ Mary pinched her wrist as hard as she could to make herself wake up. When she drew blood, she knew she was awake. For a moment she thought her heart had actually stopped beating in her chest.

‘. . . and he will reign forever – his kingdom will never, ever come to an end!’

‘But . . . how? I mean, I’ve never, that is to say – I mean, I’m a virgin.’

The angel smiled gently and slowly nodded his head.

‘With God all things are possible. This child will be conceived not by earthly means, but through his power. His Holy Spirit will come upon you so this baby will be holy – the Son of God! God has chosen you, Mary – chosen you to be the mother of his Son.’

He heard me, she thought. He knows me. He knows I wanted to do something, be someone. But this? Can this really be true?

‘God has chosen me?’ she whispered.

‘He has. And what is more, in case you didn’t know, your cousin Elizabeth is six months pregnant.’

‘No! But she’s old and besides, everyone knows that she’s . . .’

Mary hesitated, reluctant to voice the shameful truth, the secret that suggested Elizabeth was being punished by God.

‘Barren? That’s what people thought, but they’d reckoned without God! I told you, with God nothing is impossible.’

And in that moment, Mary knew. She heard the words but more than that, she felt their truth. It was as if her whole body was suddenly flooded with warmth, as if liquid honey was running through her veins. She was still scared out of her wits, a thousand questions crowding one upon another in her mind, and yet despite all that, there was a knowing, an awareness that this truly was God’s plan, his plan for her, Mary – the one ‘not like the other girls’.

‘Mary?’

The angel seemed fainter now, the light not so dazzling.

‘Mary?’ That questioning tone again.

Mary took a deep breath.



‘I am God’s slave girl. I’ll do whatever God wants,’ she said softly. ‘This seems too amazing to get my head around, but yes – I pray it happens and that I turn out to be worthy of all this.’

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Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.

*Luke 1:38*

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She bowed her head, overcome by her own emotions.

And when she looked up, ready to ask the angel one of the many questions buzzing in her brain, he had gone.

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‘Mary? Mary, where are you?’ Leah’s voice carried up to the roof and she didn’t sound happy.

‘Coming!’

Mary took a deep breath in an attempt to stop the trembling that had seized her the instant the angel departed. She swallowed hard, fixed what she hoped was a calm expression on her face and ran down the steps and into the house. It only took a second for her to realise why Leah was so angry.

‘You foolish girl!’ Her cousin gestured towards the bread that Mary had left to cool. One torn chunk lay on the wooden platter; the rest was a mass of crumbs.

‘How many more times do I have to tell you?’ Leah sighed. ‘Those scavenging dogs will take anything within reach. Why do think we have shelves?’

‘I’m sorry, cousin. I was stupid.’

‘All that flour wasted – and our last shekels gone to those . . .’ Leah bit down on her lip, resisting the urge to utter her true opinion of the Romans’ latest tax raid on the village in front of her impressionable relative.

‘I’m sorry,’ Mary repeated. ‘I will make some more at once. There is a little flour left in the sack.’

At the thought of more hours in the stifling kitchen, Mary's eyes filled with tears. Leah's face softened and she stepped closer to Mary. 'What is it, child? Are you sick?'

Mary shook her head. 'No – no, I just feel a little faint . . .'

What else could she say? She couldn't get her head around what was happening, never mind put it into words to someone like Leah.

'It is your monthly time,' Leah asserted in her all-knowing way. 'That would account for your being so thoughtless. Am I right?'

You couldn't be more wrong, Mary thought, shaking her head.

'Well, any day now, then,' Leah declared. 'I know the signs. Forget the bread – take this goat's milk to old Sarah. She's still ill, poor soul, hasn't left her house for days. You'll be safe – it's her legs, nothing contagious.'

Leah eyed Mary closely. 'You're well enough to walk the two miles, aren't you?'

'Oh yes, yes, absolutely!' The chance to escape for an hour – two, if she could pretend that Sarah had kept her talking – was too good to miss. 'And I'm so sorry about the bread.'

She snatched up the pitcher of milk, and stepped out into the street. As soon as she was out of sight of Leah's house, she slackened her pace to a mere dawdle and allowed the thoughts that were hovering on the dark edges of her mind to come to the surface.

She was going to have a baby.

She was going to have a baby and she wasn't married.

She was going to have a baby who would be God's own son.

She couldn't explain it. She didn't understand it. But she believed it with all her heart.

She also knew that no one else would believe it for one second. How would she explain it to Leah and Samuel? What was even worse, how would she explain it to Joseph?

She stopped dead in her tracks. If she continued on this path to Sarah's house, she would have to cross the marketplace and walk close by Joseph's workshop and she couldn't face that. She turned, retraced her steps for a few yards and took a narrow, stony track up the side of the hill. It wasn't an easy walk; the ground was uneven and she had to be careful not to jiggle the pitcher of milk, but there were few people

about and little to disturb her thoughts other than the bleating of a few sheep and the reedy piping of one of the shepherd boys' flutes from beyond the brow of the hill. She hesitated briefly at a bend in the track, her eyes fleetingly resting on the cave on the opposite incline; the cave holding the tomb where her parents rested.

'O Lord my God, what should I do? Please, please put the right words in my mouth, so that the people I care about won't get angry or be ashamed when I tell them about all this. Lord my God, guide me.'

She repeated the words, mouthing them silently as she crested the brow of the hill and turned to walk down to the tiny hamlet where the widowed Sarah lived.

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Sarah might be old, incapable of moving more than a few steps, and with failing eyesight, but, Mary thought, as she sat on a low stool at her feet, she certainly had all her marbles. She had remembered that it was four years ago that Mary had been orphaned, and had patted her head and murmured a prayer for the rest of the souls of Anne and Joachim. She had been almost girlish in her enquiries about the handsome Joseph and made some rather racy remarks about Mary's forthcoming marriage.

'And your dear cousin Elizabeth,' she murmured now. 'What news of her?'

Mary, lost for words, hesitated.

'I know, I know, my dear, you must miss her,' Sarah went on, squeezing Mary's hand. 'Leah told me that you used to visit her with your mother every year . . .'

'I did,' Mary nodded. 'From way back when I was a baby. Every year until . . .'

Her voice faltered.

'Well, now you're not a baby any longer but a soon to be married woman!' Sarah declared, clapping her hands so that the folds of wrinkled skin on her arms wobbled like tent flaps in a high wind. 'So you will be able to travel with Joseph and visit again!'

She rubbed her eyes. 'I remember when I was a young woman, first married to Jacob and we travelled up to . . .'

But Mary wasn't listening. The old woman's words seemed like an answer to her prayer.

Elizabeth. If what the angel had said really was true and Elizabeth really was going to have a baby – and it had to be true, didn't it, because angels never lied – then maybe Elizabeth would believe that Mary truly was pregnant by God's Holy Spirit. And Elizabeth was sensible – she would help Mary work out how to tell people, how to cope with everything that was going to happen.

It wouldn't be easy to find a way, but she had to go there. She had to spend time with the one person with whom she could be totally herself.

And she had to do it soon.

## **So what has that got to do with me?**

1. Mary felt like an outsider, someone who was seen as ‘different’ and who didn’t fit into her peers’ perception of what she should be like. Put yourself in her shoes and discuss how you would feel and then, more importantly perhaps, imagine you are one of her friends. What motivated them to think she was ‘weird’? How often do we look at someone, and assume things about them without ever bothering to find out the reality of their lives? What can we do to prevent that kind of behaviour in the future?
2. Mary’s mother had taught her that ‘whatever God has for you to do, be it crushing an olive or teaching a child or saving a nation . . . that is what you do. It is not for us to question God’s will for us.’ How do we know what God wants of us? What did Mary do when she reflected on her future? Do we believe that we have no choice, that our lives are predestined and we can’t alter them? When we face a challenge that seems to overwhelm us, what do we tend to do? Who do we go to for help, and most importantly, how do we decide who to listen to and whose advice to reject? Is there any way we can possibly know we are doing what God wants?
3. This is the first of many appearances of angels in the New Testament. Do we believe in angels? Do we see them as shining white beings with wings, or do we believe that angels come in many different guises? What made Mary sure that the angel was indeed from God? How do we make our judgements on what is from God and what is not?
4. Mary accepted her heavenly assignment with grace and faith. In her shoes, many of us would have tried to rationalise the experience or put it down to an hallucination, a dream or even stress. In our twenty-first century world, how ready are we to believe that God sends us messages too? And if we are not, why is that?
5. Mary prayed that God would help her find the right words to tell her family about her pregnancy. She prayed through her problem. Notice that Mary’s prayer wasn’t only for herself; she wanted to

find a way to make this enormous revelation easier for her family to cope with; she wanted to save their embarrassment. We know that we can pray, and we frequently do; how deep is our faith that God hears our requests and our cries of desperation? When we get a quick answer, we are happy; when it seems that our prayers go unheard, we think God has ignored us. How do we pray when we have a problem? Fancy words from a book? A cry from the heart? Persistent, ongoing prayer or just one attempt and then a tendency to say 'Forget it!'?