

BUT MARY
John 20:1-21

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Introduction

While Peter and John play supporting parts, we can be sure that Mary Magdalene has the starring role in the resurrection story. In his crucifixion account, John contrasts (“But...,” v. 25) the four women of faith with the four soldiers who carried out the execution (19:23, 25). Among the list of ladies present at the Passion, only one is not presumed to be part of Jesus’ family—Mary Magdalene. We can be certain that she had been an eyewitness to the horrible scene of the death of her Savior. She had been right there when he made the declaration, “It is finished!” and bowed his head, having accomplished all that God had assigned.

When we take a look at Matthew’s account (27:61), we discover that Mary Magdalene was also actually present as Joseph of Arimathea received the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in his (Joseph’s) own tomb. Finally, she herself had seen the large stone rolled against the tomb’s entrance, a stone that was necessary to separate the living from the dead. Matthew clearly states that Mary was sitting opposite the grave when all of the burial events occurred.

We can only imagine how downcast and disappointed she was that the one who had saved her from seven demons (Luke 8:2-3) had, in the end, been unable to save himself from the power of death. The last thing the Bible tells us she saw on Friday – the tortured body of her Deliverer being beaten, battered, bruised and buried. She had seen it all!

“There is no place that we can go where he has not been, even suffering and the grave.”
(Jennifer L. Lord, “Preaching Graveside,” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XLVI, No. 3, Easter 2023, p. 8)

This week, we join Mary as she journeys toward the tomb.

Still Dark (20:1)

Interestingly enough, each of the Gospel accounts refers to the day of the resurrection not as “the third day after the crucifixion,” but, rather, “the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1). Perhaps they wanted to present the resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of something new. The timing of events clearly serves as an explanation of why the early church chose to worship on Sunday (the first day of the week) rather than Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath).

Having seen Jesus’ actual burial, Mary knows the exact location of Jesus’ tomb. She travels there “while it was still dark.” Perhaps the mentioning of “darkness” not only tells us that she comes early, but, also, that the resurrection is a light shining in the darkness (John 1:5). While it appears

as if Mary is approaching the tomb alone, we learn from the other Gospel writers—as well as the plural pronoun “we” in the very next verse—that Mary, indeed, has company. It would have been unheard of for a Jewish woman of the first century to walk alone in the dark to a graveyard. Despite the fact that there are several women making their way to the tomb to complete the anointing of Jesus’ body, John chooses to focus on Mary Magdalene alone.

With the approaching Sabbath, Nicodemus had done a “rush job” on the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial. In the ladies’ minds, the task needs to be completed more carefully. Mournfully, they approach the tomb “bringing spices which they had prepared” (Luke 24:1). Along the way, they discuss the weighty stone which would prevent them from getting to Jesus’ body. To their great surprise, they discover the stone has already been rolled away.

Out of the Tomb (20:2)

Mary’s immediate reaction to the open tomb is to run to Jesus’ disciples. More specifically, John tells us that she “came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved.” The “beloved disciple” is identified as none other than John, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the very writer of this fourth Gospel. Interestingly enough, John is never mentioned in this Gospel by name, as he is always called “the beloved disciple.”

John gives us an honest report concerning Mary’s emotions—the possibility of a resurrection never even occurs to her. Her conclusion is clear: “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.” “They,” therefore, is a reference to grave robbers. Grave robbing was frequent enough in antiquity that Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) actually ordered capital punishment for those convicted of destroying tombs, removing bodies, or even displacing the sealing stones.

Mary is certain someone has stolen the body of her Lord. Worse still—Mary and the other ladies (“we”) have no idea where the body of their Lord has been laid.

While it is a small detail, we should not miss the fact that Mary Magdalene identifies Jesus as “the” Lord. This is the first time in John’s Gospel that he is identified by the definite article “the.” He is, to Mary, the one and only Lord.

Running Together (20:3-5)

This is a “breathless” text, as all the characters “run.” We have already been told that Mary “ran” from the tomb to find the apostles. Additionally, we are told that the beloved disciple (John) and Peter run together all the way back to the tomb. If we were to declare a winner in this “first century foot race,” we would have to declare John the victor, as he arrives at the tomb first. Cautious, however, he does not enter the tomb, but merely stoops to look in, seeing the linen wrappings lying there.

The most ancient, and probably accurate, explanation for John’s arriving to the tomb first was that he was younger, and, thus, faster than Peter.

Entering the Tomb (20:6-7)

Peter, with his impetuous nature, does not hesitate to enter the open tomb immediately. He, also, sees the linen wrappings lying there. But, having a closer inspection by entering the tomb, Peter also sees the face cloth rolled up in a place by itself.

Why does John make so much of the grave cloths? First, the presence of neatly wrapped binding material serves as evidence that a resurrection—not a robbery—has taken place. If the body had been stolen, the robbers would not have left the elaborate shrouds of linen and the very expensive perfumes and spices. Second, the imagery of Jesus' folded grave cloths stands in stark contrast to Lazarus (John 11:44), who was depicted coming out of the tomb with both the linen cloths and the face cloth still tightly bound around his body. Lazarus had to be freed from the chains of the grave, while Jesus had passed through them and neatly left them as evidence of his victory over death.

Seeing and Believing (20:8)

In some ways, verse 8 is the apex of John's Gospel, for it is here that he himself both "sees and believes" (compare 20:29). While there is no object to these verbs—that is, we are neither told what John saw and nor what he believed—there is no mistaking the meaning. John sees the grave cloths as an indication that Jesus' body has been resurrected, and he believes what Jesus had been trying to tell the disciples all along—he would rise from the dead. John, who had seen Jesus' crucifixion up close, now has the most powerful moment of his life—his Lord is, indeed, alive again!

The Scriptures (20:9-10)

John is quite honest in reporting that he and the other disciples had not yet understood "the scripture." Some scholars argue that John had a particular passage in mind: (1) Hosea 6:2, "... He will raise us up on the third day," (2) Jonah 1:17, "And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights," or (3) Psalm 16:10, "For Thou will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will Thou allow the Holy One to undergo decay." Others take the reference to "the scripture" to be a broader application referring to the entirety of the Old Testament. The resurrection explains the Scripture (what is read), and the Scripture explains the resurrection (what has been seen and experienced....).

Whatever the reference of "the scripture," we can be sure that John experiences the "aha" moment of the resurrection. He sees the emptiness of the tomb and believes in the resurrection of Jesus.

Following John's moment of faith, the disciples return back to their own homes.

Weeping (20:11-13)

Peter and John left, but Mary lingers. The second part of John's resurrection account begins with the word "But." John is communicating that—unlike the disciples who went away to their homes (v. 10)—Mary Magdalene has (at some point in the story) returned to the tomb, unaware of John's discovery and belief in the resurrection. In His farewell discourse, Jesus predicted the men would scatter – each to his own home. "But Mary." When the men were scattering, Mary went seeking Him.

Mariah Carey has a song that captures Mary's heart.

"Even though I try, I can't let go.

Do you realize the sorrow I have inside?

Do you know the way it feels when all you have just dies?"

(Carol Lynn Patterson, "Seeing, Hearing, and Knowing," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XLVI, No. 13, Easter 2023, p. 40)

Her motions, however, are much like John's, as she, too, "stoops" and "looks" into the tomb, rather than going in. Unlike Peter and John, who saw the grave cloths, Mary actually sees two angels in white, one located where the head of Jesus had been lying and the other where his feet had been.

The angels serve to put the reader on notice that what has taken place with the empty tomb of Jesus is not an invasion of robbers, but, rather, an invasion of God! The presence of angels highlights the sacredness of the sight.

The angels ask a question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" While we can never be sure what brings Mary back to the burial site, it is most likely the driving force of grief. Sometimes, in the midst of great loss, those impacted the most want to be close to the site of where their loved one—or in this case, his body—has been. Mary might also hope to find someone who could give her a clue as to the whereabouts of Jesus' corpse. Rather than embracing her grief, however, the angels question her quandry.

We should note that Mary uses a singular pronoun, "I," in her response, as opposed to the plural pronoun, "we," that she used earlier during her first visit to the tomb (v. 2). On her second visit to the tomb, therefore, Mary is alone.

The Gardener (20:14-15)

While conversing with angels, Mary turns around and "sees" Jesus standing there—but she does not recognize him. Remember, she does not yet believe. She is looking for a body, not a living Lord. Isn't it funny—we conduct our lives differently with people based on who we think they are.

The most likely character to be hanging around the tombs early in the morning is the caretaker, the gardener. Pondering whether the gardener was under orders to remove the body of Jesus, Mary Magdalene offers to make arrangements with him to retrieve the body and give it a proper burial.

Mary is not entirely wrong in her guess that the one behind her is the gardener. Pilate had already proclaimed in our previous chapter, "Here's the man!", meaning here is the new Adam, the new gardener. As New Testament scholar N.T. Wright concludes that the gardener [Jesus] is "charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests."

Mary's Moment (20:16-17)

Imagine ourselves joining Mary at the tomb. Someone whom we hold most dear has died. To make matters worse, the body has been desecrated by an unexplained disappearance. Our hearts grieve at the loss and are completely unsettled by the missing body of our loved one. All we long for is one more opportunity to anoint his bruised body, to give him a proper burial.

At this moment of greatest distress, Mary hears the calling of her name. Hearing his voice, she knows that her Lord was alive! At that very moment, she understands that there was only one person who pronounces her name exactly like that. Was it the familiarity of the tones of grace and God?

We all long for “Mary’s moment,” that moment when Jesus calls our name, and we know that death has been defeated and life has won the day! Listen closely; I think he is calling your name, too!

Mary turns and calls him “teacher,” and apparently takes hold of her Savior—with the intention of never letting go again. Jesus has already told us, “When the good shepherd calls his sheep, they know his voice” (10:3f.). When Jesus commands Mary to release him, he is probably communicating something along these lines: “Mary, our relationship has changed. I won’t be walking around Galilee and Judea anymore. We won’t be sharing regular meals, discussing, talking, and praying. I need to return to the Father—go and tell the disciples.” Scholar N.T. Wright concludes that Jesus is saying, “Don’t try to keep me, to possess me.”

When Jesus tells her to go to speak to “my brethren,” he is not speaking of his biological brothers, but, rather, his brothers in the kingdom—and she knows to go to the disciples. When Jesus says that he must ascend “to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God,” he is declaring that through his death, resurrection, and exaltation, his disciples have come to share in his sonship to the Father. Though there is a distinction in the relationships, the emphasis, nonetheless, is on the shared privileges we have with the Son (Romans 8:15-16; Hebrews 2:11-12).

The most powerful words of John’s Gospel are preached by Mary Magdalene: “I have seen the Lord!”

She is saying:

“Yesterday I was crucified with Christ; today I am glorified with Him. Yesterday I died with Him; today I am given life with Him. Yesterday I was buried with Him; today I rise again with Him.... [L]et us give honor to Him in whose likeness we are made.” (Jennifer L. Lord, “Preaching Graveside,” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XLVI, No. 3, Easter 2023, p. 7)

Conclusion

We can join John by “seeing” the empty tomb and “believing” in Jesus’ resurrection. We can join Mary in her “aha” moment, when she knows death has been defeated by her living Lord. Listen carefully; I think he is calling your name, too.

Upon crucifixion, the disciples left the Lord and fled, “but Mary” – Mary made her way to the tomb and discovered that death has been defeated.

“I have seen the Lord.”

Would you discover that today, too?