



Mary Magdalene meets the risen Jesus

Easter Sunday (John 20:1-18)

I want to tell you part of the Easter Sunday story.

This is an exciting chapter in the greatest story ever told.

I want to tell you only one part of what happened. We will focus on Jesus and Mary of Magdala. This story is told by John in his Gospel, in chapter 20.

The story reached a climax a little later in the morning. The sun was up now. Mary was standing outside the empty tomb, weeping. A man came up to her; she did not recognise him; did not know he was Jesus. But then he said one word. Her name. In Aramaic, Mariam. Or we would say, Mary. And suddenly, her world changed.

(Pause.)

Now let's go back to the start.

PPT

"Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb" (John 20:1). Mary came from a town called Magdala – the name 'Magdalene' simply means 'from Magdala'.

We don't know a lot about Mary. Mark tells us she was one of a group of women who followed Jesus and donated money to help him. Luke says Jesus cast seven demons out of her. All of the Gospels tell us that Mary was standing near the cross when Jesus died.

One preacher said, "She was last at his cross, and first at his grave. She stayed longest there, and was soonest here."

PPT Women

That morning she did not go to the tomb alone. The other Gospels mention other women: another Mary, Salome and Joanna. But Mary Magdalene seems to have taken the lead. And John only mentions her.

It is very interesting that women played such a crucial role that morning. Mary, Salome, Joanna – their names are immortalised.

All four Gospels – those first little books about Jesus – say that women played a major role that Sunday morning. The Bible scholar Richard Bauckham notes the "scrupulous care in which the gospels present the women as witnesses."

In our time, that may not seem exceptional at all. But in the first century world, it is surprising. It is strong evidence that these stories are true. That the resurrection is history, not fantasy. Fact, not fiction.

Because if you lived in the first century, and you were inventing a story to say your teacher rose from the grave, you would not choose women as your witnesses. In that culture, the word of women was not taken very seriously. Women were not even allowed to give evidence in court. You would not feature women in your story if you made it up.

In the second century there was a famous anti-Christian writer named Celsus. He rubbished the Easter Morning story, saying it was based on the hallucination of a "hysterical woman".

But God put women at the start of the events. And the first Christians were glad to give them that honoured place.

PPT The stone was moved

Mary went into the garden, and found the tomb. The tomb would have been a little cave, maybe cut out of rock. It would have a bench inside where they laid the body. John said in the previous chapter:

“When Pilate gave permission, Joseph (of Arimathea) came and took the body away. With him came Nicodemus ... He brought about 33 kilograms of perfumed ointment ... Following Jewish burial custom, they wrapped Jesus’ body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth. The place of crucifixion was near a garden, where there was a new tomb ... They laid Jesus there” (John 19:38-42, NLT).

Then they placed a heavy stone across the entrance. In some tombs, they rolled a circular stone down a sloping groove across the door.

The first thing Mary noticed was the stone had been moved. She thought, “Somebody has taken Jesus’ body!”

Immediately, she ran to where Jesus’ disciples Peter and John were staying. “She said, ‘They have taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’” (John 20:2, NLT).

Who was “they”? She didn’t know. It’s like she was saying, “Somebody has been in there and taken his body.”

PPT John and Peter

Hearing this news, Peter and John set off for the tomb. Running.

I am not going to tell you much about Peter and John, because we are focusing on Mary. But one thing is really important. Really significant.

John outran Peter and reached the tomb first, but he did not go in. John wrote:

“Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed” (John 20:6-8).

Body snatchers would have left a mess. There was no mess. Or thieves might have carried the corpse off

still wrapped up. The cloth strips were still there.

But look! Look at how they are left.

Imagine a balloon, and the air goes out. The balloon settles down and lies flat. That’s what it looked like. All those strips of cloths which had been wound around the body, had now collapsed where they were. Like there was nothing to hold them up.

Joseph and Nicodemus left Jesus’ face and neck uncovered – that was the custom. They put a towel around the head. But now, the towel was twirled up, where the head had been.

The grave clothes were still in the same places. It was as if the body had passed through them. And left them behind. John Stott said they were like a discarded chrysalis from which the butterfly has emerged.

Stott said: Now supposing we had been present in the tomb when the resurrection of Jesus actually took place. What would we have seen? Would we have seen Jesus begin to move, and then yawn and stretch and get up? Just as Lazarus did? No. We believe that he passed miraculously from death into a new sphere of existence.

(Pause.)

PPT Mary

Now, Mary followed Peter and John back to the tomb. When they left, she stayed. John emphasised that with a strong word. Mary stayed standing there. Weeping. Probably feeling confused and hopeless. John wrote:

“Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in” (John 20:11).

She too saw the strips of cloth all neatly collapsed, and the head towel rolled up, separate.

But she also saw two angels, dressed in white, sitting at either end of the bench. Angels! Radiant. Unearthly. Awe-inspiring messengers from God. Something cosmic, huge, was going on.

The angels asked her: “Woman, why are you crying?” (John 20:13).

“Woman” sounds harsh. But it did not sound harsh in the Greek. John tells us that at the wedding in Cana when Jesus turned water into wine, he said to his mother, “Woman”. It wasn’t rude. Some translations show that by translating it, “Dear woman”.

They asked: "Why are you crying?" Some people think the angels were criticising Mary. Like, "You should not be crying! Have faith!" But we need to understand people. Naturally, she was crying! The angels were simply drawing her out. It was as if they sympathetically said, "What's wrong?"

Mary said, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13). You can hear her distress. Then something wonderful happened.

"She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognise him" (John 20:14). Mary thought he must be the man in charge of the garden, come early to work.

Why didn't she recognise him? Several times people did not recognise the risen Jesus. The two disciples he appeared to on the road to Emmaus that afternoon did not recognise him at first. Luke said, "God kept them from recognising him" (Luke 24:16). Later, the disciples were out fishing when Jesus appeared on the shore, and, at first, they did not recognise him. Perhaps his resurrection body looked a bit different. We can't be sure.

Anyway, Jesus also said to Mary, "Dear woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" (John 20:15). Drawing her out. Almost a little playful.

"Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him" (John 20:15). That was pretty random. Why would the gardener have removed the body? She was desperate; feeling hopeless, confused, and lost. She was clutching at straws.

(Short pause. Go slowly.)

Then Jesus said to her, "Mary." Only he said it in their language, Aramaic, which was "Mariam". "Mariam."

Can you imagine how he said it? Tenderly. Like a friend. Yet strongly. Inviting her to realise it was him. "Mariam."

One word which remade her world and transformed her life for ever after, and the word was her own name!

The Bible scholar Dale Bruner wrote:

This is Jesus' shortest sermon in the Gospels of John. One word. Her name: Mariam. A good Shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name. And his sheep know his voice. And one word, Mary's own name, spoken by the most significant person she'd ever known, changed her whole life.

(Short pause.)

Mary turned to him and said, "Rabboni!" which meant "Teacher". Some think this version of the word "rabbi" was affectionate, and full of respect. "My dear teacher!" "Dear master."

Can you picture Mary turning to him? Her face full of wonder. Her heart full of hope. Can you imagine her face in that morning light?

Dale Bruner wrote: She turned around. And in the one or two seconds this turn took, I imagine the world shifting ever so slightly on its axis.

A second before this turn there is a woman in the deepest human despair; a second after the beginning of this turn, there is a woman in the deepest possible human elation. The rush that must have come over this woman in her two second turn is unimaginable.

She is the first person, ever, to experience the personal presence of the risen Lord.

(Short pause.)

Did she throw her arms around him? Or was that not what a woman would do in her culture? Did she only grab his feet? We don't know; but she did grab hold of him somehow. That's only natural.

The old Authorized Version of the Bible says Jesus told her, "Don't touch me," but that is a mistranslation. What he said was, "Don't hold onto me." "Don't cling to me."

"[Because] I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17).

He was telling Mary: I am risen; I am alive. But I am not going to be with you anymore the way I was before. Don't cling to me, as if I am going to live with you all the same way. You need to get used to a change, Mary. I am going to soon ascend to my Father. I will be lifted up to Heaven.

Then I will send the Holy Spirit. And I will be with you, through the Holy Spirit.

He was offering her a new hope that she could hold onto.

(Short pause.)

PPT Go and tell

So, Mary became the first person ever sent by Jesus to tell people he is risen.

Some Christians have been embarrassed that Jesus sent a woman first. And he sent her to tell the men! Over the centuries there have been a few Bible scholars who don't believe women can do things like ministry. This story makes them squirm. They try to say a woman telling the men was a one-off.

But John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was not embarrassed to say that Jesus sent a woman to tell the men he is risen. John said:

"Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, 'I have seen the Lord!' Then she gave them his message" (John 20:18).

Isn't it interesting how Jesus did not restrict his resurrection appearances to the important people? To the leaders. He appeared first to Mary. Later that day he appeared to two disciples who were not leaders at all, not well known at all.

This is Jesus isn't it. He went out of his way to appear to all kinds of people, not just the prominent ones.

PPT Us

Now here we are this morning. John wants us to believe the testimony of Mary. Later in chapter 20, John wrote: "These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is

the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name" (John 20:31).

The living God wants you and me to believe their testimony. And have life by the power of Jesus' name.

Mary turned to Jesus. And Jesus said her name. As you or I turn to Jesus in faith, we will find that he knows our name too.

Mary meets him again – and so can we

We do not know what happened to Mary after this day. How long did she live? We don't know. But we do know that was not her last meeting with Jesus.

I picture her years later. She is now an elderly woman. A little stooped. She does not do any running these days. She doesn't even turn around fast. Maybe she can't hear as well as she once did.

Early one morning, while it is still dark, she goes out into the cool of her garden. Sitting there, she remembers that wonderful morning long ago. She recalls her tears. The stone rolled away. Her run to Peter and John. The angels in white. The gardener. His word: "Mariam."

And then she prays. She turns her eyes upon Jesus.

And he comes to her again. Not visible anymore. Not physical, but through the Holy Spirit. He is right there with her.

And he says, "Mariam."

And she says, "Rabboni!"

