

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 03/31/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Resurrection of the Lord**

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, March 31st

**John 20:1-18**

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### New beginnings

On the first Easter morning Mary Magdalene discovers an open tomb and the body of her beloved Lord missing. She runs to find Peter and John in a state of panicked grief and hopelessness reminiscent of the mourners at Lazarus' funeral. This only compounds the horror of witnessing her Lord being tortured and executed on a cross. This is life without the risen Christ – hopelessness amidst a fallen world. An hour or two later she is retracing her same steps back from the empty tomb but this time she is bringing a very different message. A brief encounter with the Risen Christ has completely transformed her. This is the day when the world changed and the news she brought continues to transform lives today.

#### John 20:1-18 Commentary

*<sup>1</sup>Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.*

Jesus had died on the cross on Friday around 3:00 PM (Luke 23:44). Since the Sabbath was due to start Friday evening, by the time Joseph of Arimathea had secured the body of Jesus there was not enough time to prepare Jesus' body appropriately for burial before the Sabbath began. In Luke's Gospel the women (identified in Mark 16:1 as Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome) went to see where the tomb was so they could return after the Sabbath to finish the preparation. The Sabbath would have been over on Saturday evening; however, it would have been too late in the day to finish the necessary preparations. Therefore, the women would have returned around dawn on Sunday morning. The women were back at the tomb as early as they could have possibly been. In John's account it is still dark. This is their desire to be with Jesus, even in His death. The reference to dark is perhaps an allusion to the theological theme of light and darkness throughout this Gospel and how full understanding and belief is still yet to come.

*<sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup> So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.*

A sense of sheer urgency exudes from these next verses. On seeing the empty tomb Mary Magdalene runs to find Peter - who is now the default leader. The fact that Mary exclaims, "... we do not know where they have laid him"

suggests she was not alone in her pre-dawn visit. It is also obvious she is overcome with grief - the only physical remains of her Lord have been taken. This is loss upon loss. Grief upon grief. Both Peter and the other disciple "*the one whom Jesus loved*" (who is almost certainly John, the son of Zebedee, brother of James and author of this Gospel) run to the tomb. Perhaps John is younger since he reaches the tomb first. Acknowledging Peter as the elder, John waits for Peter to arrive and allows Peter to go into the tomb first.

*<sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.*

A breathless Peter arrives at the tomb and enters. He sees the linen cloths lying there. If the body had simply been moved, it is most likely the burial cloths would also be missing also. There are examples of grave robbers stealing the grave cloths and leaving the body but not the other way around! In recent years much has been made of the fact that the face cloth (Greek is *soudarion* which is of Latin origin meaning sweat) was found folded in a place by itself. We are always at risk of reading into the text cultural meanings of our own. It is enough to say that the folded face cloth indicates the body was not stolen (thieves would hardly take the time to fold the face cloth) and suggests that Christ had taken it off Himself and folded it neatly.

*<sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes.*

Now we have two male witnesses to the empty tomb and discarded grave cloths. This means such testimony would be admissible under Jewish law (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). The statement that the other disciple *saw and believed* is the source of much debate. Was it belief in Mary Magdalene's statement or belief in the resurrection? Did Peter already realize what had happened and then John believed when he saw? Verse 9 is clear that at this point (before the arrival of the Holy Spirit) Jesus' disciples did not understand that Jesus must rise from the dead. This also indicates that the disciples were not attempting to orchestrate events or fabricate a story to fit their ideas of what was predicted.

*<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup> And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."*

Mary Magdalene in her grief remains outside the tomb after the two men leave. As she stoops to look inside the tomb, she sees a much different sight. Two angels in white are consistent with how angels appear in the Scriptures (in pairs: Acts 1:10; in white: Ezekiel 9:2; Daniel 10:5-6; Revelation 15:6). Her grief and tears must be obvious as one of the angels asks her why she is weeping. In giving the reason for her grief to one of the angels, she responds in the same way as in verse 2 but this time it is more personal - *...my Lord... I do not know...*

*<sup>14</sup> Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."*

Mary now turns and sees Jesus who she mistakes for the gardener. Perhaps it was still dark and thus did not immediately recognize Him. She was also looking through eyes that had been crying. The resurrected body of Jesus in perfect health would not have looked like the Jesus she knew in any case, even before His recent

disfigurement. Another factor is that Mary was not expecting to see Jesus. The gardener reference is interesting. Adam was the original gardener in the Garden of Eden; Christ, the second Adam, through His perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection is a means of reconciling the relationship with God that existed in the Garden of Eden before the fall.

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

Jesus calls Mary by her name and at this point she immediately recognizes Him. Jesus as the Good Shepherd calls His sheep by their name and they know His voice (John 10:3-4). Mary then clings (lays hold of, fastens to, touches) to Jesus. This indicates Jesus is physically present in His resurrected body and not as a spirit or some sort of mirage. Jesus' physical body had not yet ascended into heaven (Acts 1:6-11). Mary Magdalene is then commissioned to bring the Good News of Christ's resurrection to the disciples. The fact that Mary called Jesus "Teacher" confirms that she was a formal disciple. The first evangelist was a woman.

### Reflections

This text is not simply a third person description of what happened on that first Easter Sunday morning. John chose (under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit) to write about this most important event in Christianity from the perspective of the personal experiences of Mary Magdalene. The text gives voice to the first-person testimony of a disciple's encounter with the resurrected Jesus – it is as though we as the readers are hearing from Mary herself. This emphasizes how the Gospel is personal - every encounter with the risen Christ is personal. Mary's announcement of Christ's resurrection has implications for her own future that she may not have immediately realized. The bodily resurrection of Christ changes her remaining life on earth and her life in eternity.

Easter is about new life and new beginnings. As the trend of dwindling church membership continues, the latest expression of the local church that emerged from a bygone era needs a resurrection. Jesus Christ, the head of the church, is no stranger to resurrection, it is therefore no surprise the church he founded undergoes resurrection on a periodic basis. What new expression of church will emerge in our time? Are we prepared for our thinking about church to undergo a resurrection?



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