**The greatest of these is charity**

*John 20:1-16 KJV*

**1** The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.  
**2** Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the LORD out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.  
**3** Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre.  
**4** So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre.  
**5** And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in.  
**6** Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie,  
**7** And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.  
**8** Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed.  
**9** For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.  
**10** Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.  
**11** But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre,  
**12** And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.  
**13** And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him.  
**14** And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.  
**15** Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.  
**16** Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.

This witness statement of a historical event, just as factual and true as any you might care to name from world history, teaches us about the nature of Our Lord Jesus Christ in a manner that no mortal mind could conceive of by itself. Though written with the pen of man, it’s depth of truth cries out of the eternal inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who testifies through the living witness of the Apostle John, that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God.

This passage is so very apt for our world today, a world littered with broken hearts and beleaguered bodies. As our world races on with advancements outpacing awareness of them, this text is an undeniable statement that as much as things change in this world, nothing really changes. Our struggles are the same now as they were two thousand years ago. What is my purpose? Who has the answer to my troubles? Am I truly loved by anyone? Who can I really count on? Why do I lose those I love? What hope is there in reality? Is it as bleak as it seems? Well friend, no it’s not as bleak as it appears to be. This passage is God’s message to you that there is a singular hope that illuminates the darkness of sorrow filled days and that light cannot be extinguished no matter the force against it. Let’s investigate the nature of this message together.

Our text opens with a grounding of when these events unfold, the first day of the week. This is the Jewish calendar would be Sunday, the day after the Sabbath. Our text opens with a similar setting as the how the Gospel of John itself opens,

**1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
2 The same was in the beginning with God.  
3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.  
4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.**

At the very commencement of time, space, energy and matter there was Jesus Christ, who through His Word spoke all things into existence. Through Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ all things began. He was there when in the fullness of the Triune Godhead when no one else was. In the seeming emptiness of eternity before Creation there was God. In the seeming emptiness of that bleak, dark morning, a mere 3 days after His crucifixion, He was there in the emptiness of the heart that Mary Magdalene and the other women felt.

You may well have known this emptiness of spirit; this lifelessness of soul that makes you question if you are even alive and the very purpose of your existence! Yet here is your comfort my friend. Your comfort is Jesus Christ, for He was there from the very commencement of all things, as He was the One who gave life to all things, including you. He was never not there. This is your comfort, that no matter the bleakness of your condition or situation you are not alone; He is there before you, next to you and leading you through to peace everlasting. Life begins in Christ, yet to understand this, the heart must know the emptiness of life without Him. Hence the Lord is merciful in His allowing of our troubled hours for in His eternal wisdom, He knows that only the heart lost in sorrow, broken of pride, humble in it’s own weakness, will yearn for light to return to them and never leave them. He is not being cruel to you friend. He is not breaking you down with bitterness and spite. No, He is leading through the valley of the shadow of death so that you might see at long last that He is the only One who can lead you through all the trials and tribulations of life. As John Calvin noted, there is no condition, trial, test, sadness or fear known and experienced by humanity that Jesus Christ is not the answer to.

Now we come to see a grief stricken Mary Magdalene braving the still dark hours of the early morning so that she might attend to the tomb of her Master. To do such a thing requires tremendous bravery and singularity of love that is so compelling to the spirit that any possible dangers of such an enterprise are not even acknowledged by the troubled soul. To go to a tomb-site in the dark to this day is a dangerous idea as many a nefarious, evil character lurk in such places. This would have been the case even more so in 1st century Israel, where the threats to women’s safety were alarmingly plentiful. Yet as noted, Mary’s sole consideration is the service of her Master, even though in her then current understanding He was departed from her.

Mary is the picture of ‘love’ in this passage. She had come to Lord having been plagued by seven devils, being released of this demonic oppression by His grace. Her once wicked state was a great depth and severity, yet it is so often the case that those who have been forgiven of much, love the fiercest and are the most devoted. They that have known the greatest miseries are the most thankful in the redemption that they have been given. So it is with Mary, from her pit of devil harassed misery, she had been gifted the love of God. She had known the bleakness of the pit and she knew the light of salvation. It is the faithfulness of Christ, the Light of the World, that through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, compelled the tear filled Mary to go to the tomb. Love, that is Godly love, compels even when the world says to abandon, and so Mary paid no heed to the darkness.

The Lord is masterful in His movements. Those who have been so broken in spirit know how you can feel so numb and undone in being that even the most terrifying of dangers hold no deterrent anymore. It is in the mysterious wisdom of God that He can use this utter despair of spirit to drive the soul through dangers that would’ve once deterred the same soul from entering the battlefield in happier days. Here is a great comfort to any soldier of Christ so troubled at this time. He has moved so majestically in the past to push on His own to victory in Christ, so why should we doubt His goodness to us? Like the parent who does not intervene seeing their child endure a temporary hardship, knowing that the outcome of overcoming that temporary difficulty will be triumph.

So Mary arrives at the tomb; it’s location carved into her heart in the sheer dejection of spirit she and the other women and disciples of Christ felt when they witnessed their Lord placed amongst the dead. Yet when she arrives, the tomb is empty. So she runs. She runs with a pace and vigour that defies the physical exhaustion her body was no doubt wracked with, for love again drives the body and spirit to realms hitherto unknown. I know the power of this phenomenon very well. When I was at my most physically wrecked, a youth who had lost several stone in weight and was house bound for months on end with illness, news reached me of the sudden death of the mother of the girl whom I had loved quietly for ten years. My heart exploded with a need to console the girl I loved and so I ran to the nearest shop that had condolence cards, hurriedly wrote a message of sympathy and ran back to put it through the letterbox of the girl I loved. Love had compelled my body to ignore it’s miserable state and instead drove me to place the needs of another over the fear of my condition. Little did I know that in that same hour, the card would be opened by the girl I loved and her brother would immediately see the contents of my heart and relay it to her by saying, “I think he likes you”. The testimony of a broken heart being stirred into life through the compelling action of a love that must be declared is one of the most potent witnesses imaginable. Here in the actions of Mary we have that same witness being delivered to the beleaguered disciples that glorious Sunday morning.

So Simon Peter and John are given the news and their response is similar to Mary’s in that they run! They run to see for themselves what manner of thing has happened and where their Master may be. It is the action of earnestness, of chasing after God so as to know Him that we have seen before in Scripture. Zacchaeus, the short, hated and corrupt tax collector **ran** to prepare his house to receive the Lord Jesus after he had desired to know who Jesus was. No doubt Zacchaeus was tired and physically troubled too just moments prior, having been pushed back repeatedly by a multitude when he tried to see Christ for himself. No doubt he was tired after having climbed a great sycamore tree as a man of small stature. No doubt he was drained by the constant hate poured out against him by the people for his corrupt ways. Yet when embraced by the call of Christ Jesus, his body is energised beyond all compare and so he runs!

Do you remember that moment when you came to Christ? How you felt so very light and energised! It came to me as a young boy, who when ill, was led to Christ in repentant prayer by my father. I remember how ill and frightened I felt, yet after the prayer when I called out to the Lord to forgive me of my sins and help me as my Lord and God, how I felt renewed in all ways! I remember my father carrying me downstairs in joy and telling my mother of the news. I remember so vividly saying to my mother how light and free I felt not just in my heart but in my body also! Our Lord came to redeem not only the spirit but the body also. It is one of the great tragedies of the Fall, that the spirit of man was ripped apart from the body so that the body would degrade and die. Yet Christ restores to God not only the spirit but also the body, a joy that shall take place in it’s fullness in happy future days. This is why we are to take care of our bodies, for they are equally redeemed by Christ and one day, Lord willing soon, they shall be restored to their full glory and purpose forevermore.

So we have Simon Peter and John running to see the empty tomb for themselves. It is interesting to note that John refers to Simon Peter with both his names, both the old and the new. When this takes place in Scripture, it is to highlight the conflict between the old sinful self trapped in the flesh and the redeemed heart in Christ. Simon Peter would likely be greatly troubled by the death of His Lord and Master and plagued by the thought that his Lord went to the grave with the final thought of the fulfilment of the prophecy of the denial of Peter of Him. Thus broken in spirit and dejected in body from fear of Jews and the physical exhaustion of grief, Simon is like so many of us at such moments of trouble, angry, confused and seemingly lost. Yet there is that same Spirit of God that refuses to let go of One of His own, that one in this instance being Peter. He had been reborn in Christ and thus renamed by Him and this man would not be allowed to wallow in despair and misery for the faith of God would not allow it. So the love of God overcomes the doubts of faith and despondency of spirit and compels him to see the empty tomb for himself.

In verse 4 we are given an interesting piece of additional information regarding this incredible event, that is that John outran Simon Peter in getting to the tomb. In a witness statement, it is these seemingly insignificant details of recollection that give validity to the testimony given. Anyone creating a fraudulent account of the resurrection of Christ would’ve one not had women be the first witnesses of the empty tomb. This is purely because in the ancient world, a woman’s testimony was worthless. So why would the disciples of Christ decide to have the women be the first witnesses of the resurrection? It would be the most illogical, self defeating commencement to a hoax imaginable in the ancient world. So similarly, this additional note of John outpacing Simon Peter gives an excellent demonstration of the accuracy of the historical testimony given by these eyewitnesses.

As John arrives at the empty tomb, he bends down and looks in but does not enter. John here is much like *hope*, for hope is the skip in the step of the individual and can give a great surge of energy that others may not hold in the same measure. It is the adrenaline to the spirit that prompts us to race excitedly to the goal. The life lived in hope is always lived with more vitality than one lived without any sense of hope. We see such a thing in many Christians today sadly. Many who are faithful indeed but they have grown cold and without hope by taking in the bleakness of the world far too much. They have robbed themselves of the potency of hope in Christ Jesus and so they unable to run with all the strength and speed that the Lord would have them.

Then Simon Peter arrives, and enters the tomb where John had not. Simon Peter is like *faith* in this instance. Though it does not have the surge of power and speed that hope can give to a spirit, it holds a certainty, a steadiness that means it will reach its goal. Then when it has led the holder of faith to the destination it leads further to see for itself the fulfilment of the hope held deep with its being. This is where hope and faith are the husband and wife of the heart, and where they are united in Christ, love is the child brought forth. We shall see the encapsulation of this truth later in the passage.

As Simon Peter enters the empty tomb, followed by John, they see the linen used to wrap the body of Jesus placed where He once laid. Interestingly we read that the napkin that covered His head is placed to the side separately from the linen used to wrap His body. Such a gentle separation speaks gently of glorious realisation that at long last, the face of the glory of God was now revealed in the risen triumph of Christ Jesus. It is the monumental actualisation of the hope first spoken of by Job centuries prior when he spoke in longing hope that he knew ‘his Redeemer lives’ and that he would see Him with his ‘own eyes’ (Job 19:25-27). Those words spoken likely before the days of Abraham are enacted to their wondrous glory by the Risen Lord who is the great I AM. Such a fulfilment of the hope of the saints is the validation of the words of Christ when He said unto the Pharisees, ‘before Abraham was, I AM’ (John 8:58).

This beautifully gentle witness of the finished work accomplished by Christ Jesus speaks powerfully to the heart of John, who gazing on the empty tomb and disused funeral linen, simply believes that His Lord is risen. Verse 8 almost ends too abruptly with John recounting that as he looked on the emptiness of the tomb, he just believed. On reading the verse it’s almost as if the mind says to John, ‘Ok, please continue.’ Yet this is the culmination of everything, this is the finality of that blessed morning. It’s utter simplicity in that in seeing that Christ Jesus has conquered death in His righteousness and that to share in His risen glory, all that is required is simple belief that all that is said to have taken place has taken place. It really is that simple.

The Passion of Christ is bookended by two wondrously clear statements of the simplicity of saving faith in Christ. Before His death, the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus, acknowledged who Jesus was and asked Him to ‘remember him’ when He went to glory. There was nothing that poor, miserable man could do or offer Him but his heart, his love and his life in simple trust that Jesus was who He says He is. Christ responded to him with gentle but unshakeable assurance that that same miserable wretch of a man would join Him in paradise that very day. Faith is all that was required and thus grace was given and a life was sealed unto eternity in the blood of Christ Jesus. Then at His resurrection from the dead, the same message of simple belief in Him is what conquers death is given is this gloriously short and simple statement by John that seeing the empty tomb, he simply believed. Let all those who teach that salvation is not so be accursed for they attack the finished work of Christ Jesus. Let all those who doubt the simplicity of the message of saving faith be reminded of what the humble servant said unto the mighty warrior Naaman that if he would do a hard thing to be cleansed, why not an easy thing? Ask yourself the same question, I would do so many exhausting and difficult things to try and achieve peace and purpose in life, why would I not do something as simple as believing on the risen Lord Jesus? The Gospel message is unchanging from millennia past to the last day of history and it’s power shall give life to all eternity. Ensure you are part of it’s outpouring of glory.

This message of the simplicity of the Gospel and the importance of a true faith born in the repentant heart carried on as John speaks in verse 9 that at this time they did not understand the fullness Scripturally of what had taken place. This limitation of knowledge did not cause devastation to saving faith for saving faith is born in the heart not the mind. One can have a tremendous knowledge of the Scriptures and yet believe nothing, such were the Pharisees. Do not be turned away from faith in Christ Jesus under the accusation that you are not clever enough, or do not know the Bible enough to believe in Christ Jesus. The continuing message of that blessed morning is that simple faith is all that is needed to know salvation in Jesus Christ. This faith is then guided and moulded through the subsequent days and years to show the redeemed in Christ through daily study of the Scriptures, that this simple faith is upheld by a depth of wisdom that only God can author. Thus we go as the Apostle Paul declares, from ‘faith to faith’. From a simple child like faith, to a mature faith then finally onto a realised faith come that glorious day when we are called home to heaven for eternal rest.

So the two disciples return unto their own homes, leaving the still confused and heartbroken Mary to linger by the empty sepulchre. Mary loves Christ deeply and fiercely and it’s that depth of love that refuses to let go until it has been satisfied with it’s wounds healed at last. She looks into the tomb with sore eyes filled with tears and sees two angels sitting at where the head and feet of Christ once laid. Seeing her despair they ask her calmly why she is weeping and who she is looking for. It is a gentle but profound question posed to Mary and indeed to all who love the Lord Jesus as their Redeemer and Master. We all get so burdened by the pain of this world and life within it that we so easily do not see what is before us every morning, that He is risen! Therefore because He is risen and sits in all power and glory, we shall also through Him! So what is there to cry over in all truth and reality? The final enemy that is death is conquered, so if the great and terrifying enemy is defeated then what is there to fear? Yet as powerfully as this message is and even though it can be given to us by angels even, it still does not heal a broken heart. There is but one voice that truly binds up a broken heart and that is the voice of Jesus Christ. It is that voice that Mary longs to hear and none other shall suffice. Like the distraught wife or husband of a life seemingly lost, though they are comforted by loved ones, none are the one they truly long for, that love of the life ripped from them.

So even though Mary is comforted by angels, she is not brought to peace. She is still distraught and seemingly comfortless. Yet the Lord is close to those of broken and contrite heart and here in this moment He is both spiritually and physically. Mary turns and sees a figure before her. The sky is still dark and her eyes are sore from a storm of tears so she does not recognise the one stood before her. Isn’t it true that many of us have lived out this situation in our own days, even with loved ones that Our Lord has blessed us with to bring comfort to our days. We can become so low and troubled in life that we do not even recognise those who love around us. They are there next to us but we do not see them for who they are and what they mean to us; all we know is the misery in ourselves.

The question posed by the angels is posed once more, this time Jesus Himself. Jesus knows the devastation in Mary’s heart and is tender towards it. How heavy handed we can be in such a situation, when a deeply troubled person is desperate for help but lost in all manner and we barrel in and effectively tell them to ‘get over it’ as it’s not as bad they are making it out to be. Thank the Lord that He is not like us but that His ways are so much higher than our ways, for He poses this question as a gentle hand out to aid the desperate Mary. He does seize her and figuratively shake her into comprehending what has taken place but instead speaks lovingly, gently so as to lead her through the misery and pain like a voice leading a lost child through a maze of trees in a bleak and cold forest.

Mary’s heart is still desperate for her Lord and Master, she longs to serve Him even though she still thinks that He is fallen to death. Love, Godly love is driving her on to gain peace even if it is costing her everything. God blesses such a love for it is of Him, for God is love (1 John 4:16) and He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). Thus the love of God in us is born in Christ, crafted by Christ, upheld by Christ and fulfilled by Christ. It is this truth that speaks to the heart of Mary and why she is compelled to keep searching for her Master as the bride in the Song of Solomon did when she sought after the one her ‘soul loveth’.

Thus Jesus now speaks but one word to bring full and lasting comfort to Mary, her name. She has longed to hear His voice and what breaks through the despair and grief is the calling of her name by the one her soul loves. There is no more beautiful an exchange in Scripture than in this passage, as the Saviour comforts and heals His wounded servant in the declaration of truly personal love for them. Just think on that. The King of Kings, the Creator of all things, the One who has conquered death itself, calls out to you personally so that you might be made whole in Him. That is stunning! There is nothing in heaven or earth that rivals this awesome gift. Though the treasures of heaven are immense beyond imagination, they still are not equal to knowing with all certainty that He loves you. A brides wedding ring can house the most stunning of diamonds but this will never compare to the treasure of the love held by the husband towards her. All crave such a love, it is here and available to all, to you! Seize it now!

How is it to be seized? By doing as Mary did in this passage. In hearing her name called by her risen Lord, she acknowledges Him to be who He is, her Lord and Master in the title, ‘rabboni’. This is how eternal life is secured and assured, in the personal response to a personal call from a personal God in the The Lord Jesus Christ. Peace at last in the darkness of the early morning is Mary’s and her life will never be the same again. You may well be heartbroken also, stumbling around in the darkness with seemingly unending tears, yet the Lord is close also and is calling you by name also. Hear His call and believe in Him, and call out to Him for who He is, your Master and Redeemer. Amen

By Jonathan Badger