

That You May Believe – John 20:1-21

Last week, in the last paragraph of chapter 19, we saw two men, followers of Jesus, take responsibility for the broken body of their Lord. They wrapped it in many yards of linen, with herbs and spices in the folds, and lovingly placed it in a new unused tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, one of the two.

All three of the other gospels mention that several of the women followers who had kept careful watch over the crucifixion observed the garden tomb where Jesus' body was placed. One of these was Mary Magdalene. They had heard the cry of agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", the cry of trust, "Into your hands I commit my spirit", and the cry of completion, "It is finished!"

They had witnessed the desecration of his body, pierced with a sword; they had felt the earthquake; they had seen the unusual mid-day darkness; and then evening had come – a night of sorrow and grief, bereft of the man who meant the most in the world to them.

Do you feel the emptiness, the questions, the shock at this moment in John's account? Can you imagine even a little bit what that would have felt like? – the confusion, the fear, the deep disappointment, the anger even – if this had, in fact, been the end of the story. But wonderfully, this is not the end of the story for Jesus, for the women, for the other disciples, or for us! Let's read the first 18 verses of John 20 to pick up the story.

Read John 20:1-18

John tells us that in the early morning hours, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. (Although John focuses on Mary, the other gospels make clear that some of the other women were involved and that their purpose was to anoint their Lord's body with spices.) They are met with an upsetting sight – the stone that had sealed the mouth of the cave-like tomb had been moved aside. What could this mean but that Jesus' body had been moved?

Mary, in her deep concern, runs to Peter and John and tells them that the Lord's body is not in the tomb. Even this had now been denied them – they don't even know where it is. Peter and John immediately run to the tomb to see for themselves. John, probably the younger, outruns Peter, arrives at the tomb first, bends to look in the opening, and sees the linen burial

cloths lying there. Peter catches up, and impulsively barges right into the tomb. Sure enough, the cloths are lying on the ledge where the body had been, but there's an eerie order to the scene. Even the head cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was neatly folded, and appropriately apart from the other wrappings. Some have suggested the empty cloths resembled a deflated balloon, or an insect's chrysalis.

When John eventually follows Peter into the tomb and takes in the scene – an empty shroud and a still wrapped head covering – we're told he believed, he saw with understanding. It certainly sounds as if he believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. John is careful to point out to us that belief in Jesus' resurrection didn't come from their understanding of the Old Testament, but from evidence that had no other plausible explanation.

In verse 10, Peter and John return home, and in v 11, Mary has returned to the tomb. Who is this Mary Magdalene who is the first witness to the empty tomb, and will become the first to meet the risen Jesus? We are first introduced to her in Luke 8:1-2, where we are told that as Jesus went through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God, he was accompanied by the twelve, and by "some

women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities”, including “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven spirits had gone out.” Unlike the sick who often approached Jesus for healing, the demon possessed were hostile to him, and none took the initiative to be delivered. Jesus therefore must have taken the initiative to deliver her; she had not taken the initiative to find him.

Other descriptions of demon possession in the gospels are truly scary. Matthew 8 describes two possessed men of the Gadarenes who lived among the tombs and were so fierce and violent that no one could pass the area where they lived. Such people often lived in burial areas outside of town. If you have seen or read “The Exorcist”, you’ve probably been horrified at what demon possession can result in. It’s not at all unlikely that Mary’s past included wandering about the countryside, screaming, beating her body, pulling out her hair, convulsing and thrashing around on the ground. This had been Mary’s past, living the lowest and most useless of lives.

But Jesus had delivered her, and, as we saw from Luke 8, had chosen her as one of a band of women who served him and supported his ministry. She was not unworthy in Jesus’ eyes. Carolyn Custis James says, “All four gospels portray her as one

of Jesus' most devout followers, a bold leader, and a crucial eyewitness of the most dramatic moments in the life of Christ. She appears in nine different lists of women, and in all but one her name heads the list. Among the followers of Jesus, Mary's name occurs more often than most of the twelve apostles." Mary's story should be a huge encouragement to us as we pray for "hopeless cases" in our lives. Jesus is the seeker of lost sheep wherever they are.

Jesus had freed Mary to follow him – she had truly been transformed. She was a follower, a supporter, and one of his students. She accurately addressed him as Rabboni, my teacher, despite the unwillingness of rabbis of the day to teach women. She was a witness to all that he suffered, his death sentence, his torture, his crucifixion and burial. No wonder she could not tear herself away from his tomb! And as we're about to see, her faithful loyalty is to be rewarded as she is chosen to be the first to see Jesus alive from the dead.

Petr and John could easily have been given the role of first eyewitnesses. How much more appropriate and valid their testimony would have been than that of a woman, a woman(!), who had been rescued from seven evil spirits. How different

God's value system is than ours. We choose the important, the "best", the impressive. Paul reminds the Corinthians that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, what is weak in the world to shame the strong, what is low and despised in the world...to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Let's return now to Mary who in verse 11 has returned to the tomb after Peter and John's departure. She continues to wait and grieve, her eyes full of tears, her future unknown, her teacher and rescuer gone. In his absence will she once again be vulnerable to the evil spirits who had tormented her for so long? Is her deliverance and freedom a thing of the past? Weeping, she stoops to look into the tomb and sees two angels. "Why do you cry", one asks. Listen to Mary's incredibly sad and forlorn reply. "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him."

Turning away, maybe wanting to grieve alone, she sees another man who also asks her why she is weeping and who she is seeking. Thinking that he might be the gardener, she asks where he has laid the body, so that she could care for it. In response to this expression of loyalty and love, she hears her name, "Mary".

There can only be one person whose voice it is – “Rabboni”, my beloved teacher. This is the voice of the shepherd who called her in the first place; the one whose sheep hear his voice, and know him, and receive his gift of eternal life.

As she falls at his feet, grasping them, Jesus tells her “Don’t hold on to me. I need to go to my Father, and I want you to go to my brothers. I have a message for them.” Keller suggests that “Mary looks for a visceral sense of Jesus as she knew him, not aware yet that the promised Holy Spirit will give a deep personal awareness of Jesus’ presence.” Mary has been commissioned to pass on the glorious good news, “I have seen the Lord.” She is a “sent one” to the “sent ones”, an apostle to the apostles! Despite their failure to pray with him in the garden, and to stand up for him during his suffering, Jesus calls the disciples brothers. He includes them as part of his plans. “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Read John 20:19-29

Later that day the disciples remained fearfully locked in a room, continuing to disbelieve what they regarded as the idle tales of the women, who they viewed as unreliable witnesses at best. Suddenly Jesus appears with words they had heard before, “Peace be with you.” He holds out his hands and shows them

his side – the wounds that were evidence of who he was, and what he had done. Then at last they were glad! What a great understatement! What glorious rejoicing!

And then the words of commission: “As the Father sent me, I am sending you.” They had failed miserably; what were they good for? They had failed in the garden, during Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, and now in the face of eyewitness evidence that he was alive. But Jesus’ words spoke love and forgiveness and understanding to them. He had a purpose for them. He still wanted to use them, sending them even like he was sent, and empowering them to carry out that mission. As the Lord God had breathed on Adam the breath of life in Genesis 2, so he breathed on the disciples the Holy Spirit – a kind of anticipation of Pentecost – empowering them for the mission of new creation – proclaiming the good news of sins forgiven, and judgment if sins remained unforgiven.

The narrative in our chapter comes to a close with the story of “Doubting Thomas”. Only John records this incident. Maybe his tender heart was moved by it. Thomas had not been with them when Jesus had come to them in the locked room. When the other disciples tell him that Jesus appeared to them, Thomas refuses to believe unless he has absolute proof. He tells them

that only in seeing and touching Jesus' wounds – his pierced hands and side – will Thomas believe.

And if John has a tender heart, we see here one whose response is even more tender and loving. A week has passed and Jesus appears again to the disciples – his brothers – with his message, “Peace be with you” – Thomas included. He says, “Here, Thomas, see my wounds, touch them – believe!” And Thomas is humbled, crying out, “My Lord and my God!” – a heartfelt confession of faith. How loving and gracious Jesus is to any of us who struggle honestly with our doubts, confessing them to him.

In verse 30, John tells us he wrote this book so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in him. Chapter 20 fills in this picture by calling us to believe that Jesus is our Deliverer, our Teacher, our Peacemaker, our Empowerer, our Certainty, and our Lord and our God.

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