

“The First Witness” (John 20:1-18) BCF 2012.04.08

John 20:1-2 *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. ² 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."*

We are indebted to many capable historians like N T Wright who have shown that neither the Roman world nor the Jewish world of the first century **ever expected anything like a physical resurrection of an individual who had been dead.** “**People don’t rise from the dead**” is not a new statement at all. The Greeks and Romans generally believed in an afterlife, but one that was hyper-spiritualized and did not include the body. The Jews believed in a physical resurrection of all humanity at the end of history to face judgment. But nobody expected an individual, not even the long-expected Messianic king to do so before the time.

An unusual feature of this account that lends authenticity to it is **that the first witness was a woman.** (In fact, in combining the other accounts, there were several women.) It would have been easy for the gospel writers not to include this story, since testimony by women was largely not acceptable in that day. On your list of witnesses to a skeptical world you don’t want to lead with women, especially a woman like Mary Magdalene.

We do not know a lot about Mary Magdalene, though from the second and third century onward many have speculated wildly about her... like she moved to France and became a nun, or she had married Jesus, or she became a Gnostic leader. She is reported to be buried in Magdala, or Ephesus, or France. I think we can rule out that she is buried in Graceland in Elvis’s grave. We **know a few things about her.** She had a very common name in honor of Moses’ sister Miriam. (There are quite a few Marys in the gospels.) She came from Magdala, a village on the northwest side of the sea of Galilee not far from Tiberius. Somewhere during Jesus’ ministry she was healed, and healed of something that was demonic in origin. We don’t know if her symptoms were extreme immorality, or a crippling physical ailment, or mental derangement. We’re not told. But one day in her darkness and bondage, she heard a voice. And Jesus in mercy reached down to her and spoke words which brought her liberation. In joyful gratitude she began to follow Jesus and his company of disciples and enjoy the teaching ministry of Jesus.

Luke 8:1-3 Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

She was **with the disciples all the way to the end.** And she is there at his crucifixion. She is there when he is buried. And she will be among the first to make sure his burial is properly done. And so she comes to the tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea and sees that the stone which had been rolled to seal it was now rolled back...

John 20:3-10 *So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus¹ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.*

The resurrection accounts in the other gospels, like this one, **do not read like legendary or fictional material**. There are no enhancements or embellishments. Jesus does not appear as glowing or hovering figure like one might see in a painting or special effects like one might experience in a movie. There are irrelevant details – like John and Peter’s race to the tomb. And curious details, such as the grave clothes left behind. That the face cloth is folded to one side, which seems to indicate whatever happened inside was unhurried and peaceful. Which seems to rule out that the body was stolen. Besides, why take the grave clothes off and just steal the body anyway?

All historians who have studied this period – whether they are conservative or liberal – all are **in agreement about the basic facts of the resurrection**: a) that Jesus of Nazareth was executed by crucifixion, b) that he was buried in a known tomb, c) that the tomb was discovered empty, and d) many claimed to have seen, spoken with or touched Jesus alive after the third day. Where historians differ is how to explain what that means.

“As yet they did not understand the Scripture.” What the Jews expected was a final, general bodily resurrection of all people at the end of history to face the judgment of God. That a person even like the Messianic King, the expected good Ruler, would rise before that time was not believed. The prophet Isaiah wrote hundreds of years previously that the Messiah (the great King) would die as a sacrifice for sins and would rise to be rewarded. (Isaiah 53:9-12) But people naturally assumed, again, that would be at the end of time. They overlooked one little verse buried in a Psalm written a thousand years before by King David whom the Bible said was the ancestor of this great King, also called the Son of David.

“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.” (Psalm 16:10)

This prophecy, which obviously did not apply to King David, did apply to his great descendent, the Son of David. Interestingly, it is not specifically a prophecy that he should be resurrected, at least not at the end of history. It was a prophecy about timing. Namely, that the Son of David, **when he died, would not be abandoned (or left in the grave) or dead long enough to undergo decay**. And by Jewish reckoning, decay became evident by the third or fourth day.

But the disciples – even though they believe something is up – just did not yet connect it this way yet. Meanwhile, just like guys, they probably felt there was nothing more they could do there so they went back to where they were staying. Mary lingers, and good for her!

John 20:11-13

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ 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."

Even looking at the evidence Mary, like the men before her, **doesn't really put it together**. She's still convinced that he is dead and dead people don't rise from the dead until the end of history. And now there is an appearance of two angels, one seated at the head and foot of the stone ledge where his body lay. Perhaps this is reflection of the two graven angels on the top of the **ark of the covenant of Israel**, who looked upon the place of atonement and justice, symbolizing the place of the restoration of our fellowship with God.

They ask her why she is weeping, as will Jesus ask shortly. A sidebar here for Christians: sometimes **the sorrow we feel in life is self-imposed**. We simply do not think through what the Lord has said, and we come to believe things are much worse than they are. In light of Jesus resurrection, and the future resurrection of all who believe, there are some things we don't really need to weep over.

John 20:14-16

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Whether her eyes are filled with tears, or the light is dim, or Jesus is hiding his identity, at any rate **she does not recognize him**. This is one of the many features of the resurrection accounts which is interesting. There are angels, Jesus can apparently appear behind locked doors, or not be recognized. Yet he eats meals with them, they can touch his wounds (now scars). This is not all "other-worldly", but very this-worldly, but not quite. The same but different.

She **supposed him to be a gardener**, which John notes for irony, also a common feature in the gospel of John. Life was lost in a garden long ago by the first man put there to cultivate it (Gen 2). Now life is returned by the second Adam at a tomb in a garden, and he is mistaken, but not mistaken, for the Gardener. Jesus speaks and asks searching questions, just as he did in his ministry before his death. She still does not understand and weeps uncontrollably.

So he speaks her name. "Mary." Now here I would like to pause over Jesus' speaking of Mary's name, and make **three observations**:

a) It's the same Jesus. He asks searching questions, just like he always did (v. 15; cf. 1:38): “why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” And then he speaks her name. In reading a little about biometrics I learned that you can record a human voice in the form of a spectrogram with frequency and time. And given the shape of our heads, and jaws, and accents and mannerisms, every human voice (just like snowflakes, and fingerprints, and DNA) is unique. Imagine what Mary felt when she heard that voice that was so familiar and beloved to her. [*If we were doing a movie of this we'd be tempted to adjust the sound, more reverb, deeper bass, etc.*] The One she knew so well in life is the same One she meets risen from the grave. I know that the Lord Jesus I trust now is the same as I see on the pages of Scripture. After his resurrection Jesus is glorified but that does not mean he becomes some kind of advanced being unrelated to his earthly life. He is exactly the same but in glory. You can know him too: “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*” (Hebrews 13:8) The One I trust today is the same One I read about on the pages of Scripture.

b) The worth of the individual. His word “Mary” highlights her individual identity, and that she is known by Jesus after the resurrection. Some religions view eternal life as the snuffing out of our individuality, that we will be, as it were, drops which return to be absorbed by the vast ocean. This is not the kind of eternity that Jesus taught about. Though part of a vast new heavens and new earth, and an eternal holy City, we will still be known as individuals. In the gospel of John we see especially Jesus’ focus on individuals: Philip, Simon, Nicodemus, woman at the well, the man born blind, etc. Later John will write the words of Jesus in Revelation 2:17, “*To the one who conquers...I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.*”

c) We are created for relationship. Hearing him (that unmistakable voice!) speak her name turned the despair of a lost relationship to the joy of reunion. We should note that there’s a continuity of relationship from old creation to new: the same Jesus she knew and followed on earth, is the same she shall know in the new creation. He is not so exalted that he cannot relate to us here and now. The resurrection of Jesus is an historical event, but it is more than that. It is the invitation to a relationship that he promises will last forever, from this world to the next. The gospel is an invitation for you to know him and be known. In speaking of himself as the good shepherd he says...

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” (John 10:3, 4)

We are made not only for relationship with Christ, but also with each other. The friendships we enjoy here today, with each other in Christ, are part of that blessing. If Christ had not come and died and risen from the grave, then I would not have known any of you all!

d) The power of Jesus’ word. He himself is called the Word sent into the world. He spoke healing, he spoke words of eternal life. Even when officers were sent to stop him teaching and

they returned unsuccessfully: "The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" (7:46) When Jesus spoke a name, things happen: Peter the fisherman becomes an apostle and fisher of men (1:42), Lazarus, a dead man called by name, comes to life (ch 11). Mary in despair hears his voice and returns to joy. She first heard that voice when he spoke to her deep in her darkness and bondage. And light and freedom shone into her life. In joy and gratitude she began to follow Jesus with many others. Now in her despair she hears that compassionate voice again, turning her darkness and confusion to joy. And it's the power of his word that explains her utterance...

Mary answers with unrestrained joy, "Rabboni!", which is an honorable title meaning, "my teacher!" (She also refers earlier to him as Lord.) That may seem a bit odd but it's not a calculated response, for this is how she has addressed him in the weeks, and months past. It is natural, it is warm, it is respectful... and it tells us what we really need to know about Mary Magdalene. Whatever her past, whatever her future, the Scripture tells us she was a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Not one of the "official twelve" who would take leadership of the church, but one who traveled with and was taught by Jesus. (Cf. Mary of Bethany, Luke 10:38-42) Jesus, unlike most of his day, had a high view of women and was pleased to teach them along with men.

John 20:17-18

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.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" - and that he had said these things to her.

Mary, having lost Jesus once, **is not about to let that happen again**, and falls down at his feet and clings to him. (This clinging also shows that Jesus was a physical being, not an hallucination on hologram.) She knew that he had said that he would return to the Father, and she doesn't want him to leave. But his ascension would be over a month away and she need not cling in panic. The time for proclamation has come. She needs to go tell the others that the resurrection joy might be shared.

"...my Father AND your Father..." Over 20 times in John's gospel Jesus speaks of "my Father", but never to others that God is their Father. Only here, at this time, does he speak of God his Father as being "your Father." What does he mean by that, and why does he say it? All through the gospel he speaks of this glorious relationship between himself and God the Father. It's often not like that in real life, there are many examples of bad fathers and absent fathers and passive fathers and abusive fathers, but Jesus taught that his relationship with God the Father – which is what fatherhood was supposed to point to -- was a glorious and good thing. That special relationship with God now becomes ours through the death of Christ upon the cross accomplished what we could never. John records these words of Jesus, "my Father and your Father" for us, to emphasize the fact that our adoption into God's family comes about only through the work of Christ.

The Bible teaches us that deep in our hearts we are rebels. We may be actively so, shaking our fist at God. Or we may be passive, pushing God away. But God sends his Son. And he bore our sins, he conquered sin and the devil and death, and rose victoriously.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Mary Magdalene provides a picture. She once lived in darkness and bondage. Then one day Jesus came by, and in his infinite mercy and grace and power, he reached down and saved her. In joyful gratitude she became a follower of Jesus, a hearer and believer of his word, and a faithful servant. She knew him and she loved him and she was faithful. This is biblical faith and its results. *Jesus did not die as a martyr, but as a substitute, so that we might all have this kind of relationship with him.*

Does this describe you? Can you see yourself in this story? *Do you want to see yourself in this story?* To be a Christian means we too see our darkness and bondage to sin. That we too call out to the Lord to save us, that we believe this wonderful message of Christ crucified for our sins, and raised on the third day. We believe. We believe the gospel and begin to live accordingly. Faith becomes love, becomes obedience, becomes faithfulness.

Mary Magdalene is more than a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. She's that and more. She's a witness to the amazing grace of Jesus, and his power to deliver from sin and death. Jesus lifts her out of bondage and makes her the first witness to his resurrection. Mary is a testimony to the power and joy of a relationship with the living Lord Jesus, that you and I can also have. Believe this good news and follow Jesus!